
The United States and the United Nations: toward a new realism

John Gerard Ruggie

Quantitatively, international governmental organizations (IGOs) are still an expanding force in international affairs. According to one recent count, there now exist more than 1,100 such organizations all told. Some 40 percent more IGOs were created in the 1970s than in the 1960s. And, with the passage of time, more and more are being created by decisions of existing organizations rather than by treaty ratification by states.¹

Qualitatively, however, the world of IGOs is not in good shape. Indeed, there is widespread talk these days about a crisis of multilateralism, especially but not exclusively in the context of the United Nations.² With regard to peace and security, the UN secretary general himself has remarked that the organization's machinery functions so poorly that the international community finds itself "perilously near to a new international anarchy."³ North-South economic negotiations in the United Nations have been stalemated for a decade, and the decade-long Law of the Seas negotiations failed to produce a universally acceptable treaty. The administrative performance of the United Nations and its agencies is said by many critics to be inferior, the salary and benefit levels inflated. Many of its technical agencies are

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1. Harold K. Jacobson, William Reisinger, and Todd Mathers, "States and IGOs: A Multiplying Entanglement" (paper presented at the 1984 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.). This count includes secretariat units enjoying an independent legislative mandate but not subsidiary bodies such as departments or divisions.

2. See the speech, "What Future for Multilateralism?" by UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, delivered to the Geneva Diplomatic Club and the Centre d'études pratiques de la négociation internationale in Geneva, 3 July 1984, reproduced as UN Press Release SG/SM/3574, 9 July 1984; and the 1984 *Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization* (A/39/1).

3. *Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization, 1982* (A/37/1), p. 5.

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accused of having become thoroughly politicized. There is a pervasive sense that the system as a whole is somehow out of control.

Nowhere are these feelings as pronounced as they are in the United States. Contrary to popular myth, there never was a “golden age” in U.S.–UN relations—not even when the General Assembly tended to favor “our” issues and “our” side, often by a predictable majority of nearly ten to one; when the Soviet Union was effectively isolated; and when no large, cohesive bloc of Third World states existed.⁴ Moreover, there have been previous periods of irritation. It is no exaggeration to say, however, that a fundamental reassessment of U.S. ties with the United Nations and its agencies is under way today. Unfortunately, this reassessment has been dominated to date almost exclusively, both inside the government and in the broader public arena, by those for whom the problems of multilateralism are often a vindication of the efficacy of unilateralism. Congressional supporters of the United Nations these days are few in number and low in profile.⁵ The executive branch has been, if anything, more uniformly critical of the United Nations.⁶ The non-governmental constituency of the United Nations has lagged badly, in resources, organization, and lobbying skills, behind those who oppose much of what the organization does.⁷ The academic community, from which one would hope for the dispassionate analyses that should inform policy debates, has barely been heard from at all.⁸

4. Indeed, the morning after the U.S. Senate ratified the UN Charter by a vote of 89 to 2, James Reston reported in the *New York Times*: “It was a grim-appearing Senate that rolled the ‘ayes’ on the final count this evening. Despite the long parliamentary debate in the chamber on the subject, and despite its overwhelming approval at the end, there was no sense of a job finished but merely of a difficult job just beginning” (29 July 1945, p. 1).

5. As a result, an amendment by Senator Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas to cut the U.S. contribution to the United Nations by \$500 million over four years drew a two-thirds majority in the Senate, though it was not approved by the House. An amendment by Senator Robert Kastens of Wisconsin, requiring an annual State Department report to the Senate detailing the voting pattern of individual UN members, was approved by the Congress and is now law; the idea was to hold other countries accountable for their UN voting in the reckoning of U.S. foreign aid.

6. President Reagan’s first reaction was favorable to Ambassador Lichtenstein’s invitation that members of the United Nations “seriously consider removing themselves and this organization from the soil of the United States”—a position associated in the past with a tiny minority of ultraconservatives. Recently, though, the administration has taken a more constructive position than several critics in the Congress.

7. Most effective in this regard has been the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C. Not many UN bodies have escaped criticism from its “United Nations Assessment Project Study,” which issues frequent broadsheets that have had a discernible impact in shaping official U.S. attitudes toward the United Nations during the early phases of the first Reagan administration and receive extensive coverage by the national press. A recent summary of the foundation’s position is contained in Burton Yale Pines, ed., *A World without a U.N.: What Would Happen if the U.N. Shut Down* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1984).

8. A major exception is the debate over UNESCO, in which both physical and social scientists have spoken out. For one such contribution, by a distinguished student of international organization, see Harold K. Jacobson, testimony before the Human Rights and International Organization Subcommittee, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 26 April 1984.

The purpose of this brief article, published on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the United Nations, is to begin to rectify the abdication of responsible comment by the academic community. It is not an academic treatise about the United Nations but a contribution to the current policy debate by an American academic who has studied the United Nations closely for some time. Professional students of international organization can perform, it seems to me, two valuable public services. One is to remind the public how severely the contemporary world system and the exigencies of politics within it circumscribe the capacity of international organizations to effect any measure of collective governance. The other is to help pinpoint specific organizational problems and shortcomings that governments and international officials can influence and control. In short, the academic community can help engender realistic expectations and offer proposals for institutional reform.

I focus on two areas of concern, one because it constitutes for the American public the irreducible *raison d'être* of the United Nations, and the other because it has been the object of much of the congressional criticism of the organization. The first is the role of the United Nations in the maintenance of international peace and security—ultimately, for the American public, why the United Nations exists. For critics the organization is at best ineffective in this area; at worst, it contributes to rather than helps resolve international disputes. The other area of concern is the administrative performance of the UN system, including the specialized agencies. Here, the criticisms are that the United Nations comprises so bloated and inefficient a bureaucracy, and that the agencies have so politicized their technical tasks and deliberations, that the United Nations as a whole accomplishes too little of what it was designed to accomplish (and at great expense). No assessment of the relationship between the United Nations and the United States can, however, limit itself to the United Nations alone; hence I briefly take up the recent performance of the United States in relation to the organization.

The maintenance of peace and security

For the governments assembled in San Francisco, the primary purpose of the United Nations was to “maintain international peace and security.”⁹ Some two hundred international conflicts later, the goal still appears elusive. What has been the record, what are the problems, and what the prospects? In the record we can distinguish three types of UN activities: normative

9. Article 1.1 of the UN Charter continues, “and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace.”

development concerning the nonuse of force, nonintervention, and peaceful change; the creation of specific international rules governing levels and types of national armaments; and the management of actual conflicts among states.

In the first area, development of a normative presumption against the use of force, the United Nations can best be thought of as a source for the legitimation of certain standards of national behavior. Here its contribution is weak. For instance, it took nearly thirty years of effort merely to define interstate aggression. Specific cases of aggression tend to be condemned, but not uniformly so and rarely if the conflict opposes two nonaligned states. The use of force in support of decolonization actually enjoys some degree of legitimacy, though what constitutes "colonialism" has become increasingly ambiguous. Moreover, the status of international law appears to have reached a particularly low point in recent years. For the moment, progress toward a more robust, international normative order remains constrained by the East-West and North-South struggles, and to some extent it is also and intricately connected with progress toward the resolution of conflicts in the Middle East and southern Africa.

In the second area, the creation of international rules governing levels and types of national armaments, the United Nations serves as both an arena and a catalyst for actual negotiations. The pattern of outcomes is fairly consistent: no discernible impact on the rate of growth of existing arsenals, nuclear or conventional; a substantial role in helping proscribe the spread of nuclear weapons either to additional states (Non-Proliferation Treaty and IAEA safeguards) or to extraterritorial settings (deep seas, outer space, atmosphere); and a more limited role in prohibiting the development of entirely new weapons systems (biological weapons as well as environmental modification). This pattern follows quite closely the managerial capacity of the concert of major powers to affect outcomes in each of these domains.

The third area, management of actual conflicts among states, involves two distinct tasks: the peaceful resolution of disputes and UN enforcement action. Here the United Nations serves as a forum for concerted action and as an actor in its own right. With respect to peaceful resolution, it was widely appreciated from the start that superpower disputes would not readily lend themselves to accommodation in the veto-governed Security Council. Where UN efforts have been least effective, however, is in conflicts between two nonaligned countries; there seems to exist in the international community an extremely high level of tolerance for such disputes. In the aggregate, UN efforts at peaceful resolution have been most effective in cases where a Western nation (other than the United States) or a nation aligned with the West has initiated a dispute with a nonaligned state.¹⁰

10. A good compendium and analysis of cases can be found in Mark W. Zacher, *International Conflicts and Collective Security, 1946-77* (New York: Praeger, 1979); and a more up-to-date statistical overview in Ernst B. Haas, "Regime Decay: Conflict Management and International Organizations, 1945-1981," *International Organization* 37 (Spring 1983).

The ability of the United Nations to settle or even isolate disputes reached, with the important exception of the 1973 Arab–Israeli conflict, a nadir by the mid-1970s. It has not improved much to this day. This decline in efficacy roughly coincided with several developments: the arrival in the United Nations of many more developing countries, guarding their newly acquired sovereignty and making consensus more difficult to achieve; the constraint that U.S. military involvement in Vietnam placed on U.S. initiatives in the Security Council for dealing with conflicts elsewhere; and American success in marginalizing the role of the Soviet Union in such critical areas of conflict as the Middle East, thus ensuring Soviet opposition in the Security Council to international approval of U.S.-negotiated settlements. The revival of Cold War rhetoric in the 1980s worsened an already bad situation.

Virtually by default, therefore, the focus of UN activity in the peaceful resolution of disputes has shifted to the secretary general. At the present time the only open channel of communication to the Soviet Union concerning the withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan runs through the office of the secretary general. Similarly, in the Iran–Iraq war, it was the secretary general’s office that first brought the matter before the Security Council, repeatedly sent mediators to the region, corroborated damage done to civilian targets, documented the use of poison gas, and, most recently, reached an agreement with the two sides to refrain from deliberate military attacks on purely civilian centers. “Unfortunately,” as the *Washington Post* noted in an editorial, “the political side of the UN”—for which we may read governments seated in the Security Council—“has consistently dillydallied.”¹¹

As for enforcement action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, it was a dead letter in 1945 and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. In recognition of this fact, Dag Hammarskjöld and his staff back in the 1950s invented the more modest notion of peacekeeping forces.¹² These forces have been deployed in a dozen or so instances—in the past, generally to control conflicts attending decolonization that threatened to become globalized along East–West lines. On the whole, peacekeeping has been a success story for the United Nations, as even some of the fiercest critics of the organization are obliged to concede.¹³ Of late, however, governments have shown some

11. *Washington Post*, 2 April 1984. As a result, the secretary general simply informed the Security Council of the June 1984 agreement on civilian centers, making no attempt to obtain its concurrence—an indication of his fear for the viability of the agreement once subjected to American–Soviet maneuvering in the Security Council.

12. Brian Urquhart, UN undersecretary general in charge of peacekeeping, has defined the concept as “the use by the United Nations of military personnel and formations not in a fighting or enforcement role but interposed as a mechanism to bring an end to hostilities and as a buffer between hostile forces. In effect, it serves as an internationally constituted pretext for the parties to a conflict to stop fighting and as a mechanism to maintain a cease-fire.” Urquhart, “International Peace and Security: Thoughts on the Twentieth Anniversary of Dag Hammarskjöld’s Death,” *Foreign Affairs* 60 (Autumn 1981), p. 6.

13. The Heritage Foundation report on the subject (Roger A. Brooks, “U.N. Peacekeeping: An Empty Mandate” [Washington, D.C., 20 April 1983]) appears to imply in its subtitle that

reluctance to use this instrument. Their reluctance in the first instance reflected an almost uniform reaction against Hammarskjöld's attempt to transform the United Nations into a more active peace organization, as exemplified by his direction of the Congo operation. Subsequently, it became compounded by the growing paralysis of the Security Council and the growing irrelevance of the General Assembly to peace and security issues. Most recently there has been a greater resort on the part of the major powers to the use of national forces in attempted peacekeeping roles, including the ill-fated multinational force in Lebanon, which both resulted from and contributed to the marginalization of the UN peacekeeping instrument.

What can we conclude from this brief survey of the record to date? Where do we go from here?

When the United Nations works on matters of peace and security, it works to insulate and contain, to provide an environment within which governments can undertake measures to deal with underlying issues. This proposition is as true of nonproliferation as it is of peacekeeping. Taking an issue to the United Nations is, therefore, only the beginning of collective conflict management, not the end. If governments with the means to do so do not follow through, no issue can be resolved.¹⁴ The United Nations has not worked at all well in the peace and security area of late because governments have failed to exercise their influence and provide support in behalf of collective efforts. The normative authority of the organization has been dissipated, and its decision-making arenas are in disarray.

A reversal of this desultory state of affairs can be led only by the permanent members of the Security Council, in particular by the two superpowers. The United States and the Soviet Union have similar, or at least complementary, interests in resolving a number of disputes in which they are not themselves involved—Iran–Iraq being a prime example. Indeed, a window of opportunity may now exist in the peacekeeping field, for the multinational force experiment in Lebanon has failed, Israel is looking favorably upon an expansion of the UNIFIL mandate, the withdrawal of French and Libyan troops from Chad has been negotiated, and the Angolans appear eager to reduce the burden of the Cuban presence there. Tacit agreement or behind-the-scenes efforts by the United States and the Soviet Union to support UN attempts to resolve conflicts from which neither can hope to gain any advantage would not only

lack of jurisdiction is part of the problem; the report, however, proceeds as if no such constraint existed. It also contains numerous factual errors. For the UN response to it, presumably drafted by Urquhart, see "United Nations Peace-keeping: Comments on Heritage Foundation Publication," UN Department of Public Information, Press Section (New York, June 1983).

14. Again, the nub of the problem is alluded to by the critics: "In terms of American interests, the United Nations' peacekeeping operations have been convenient; however, they may also have provided the United States with excuses to postpone those hard decisions of national security that it must eventually make." (Patrick J. Garrity, "The United Nations and Peace-keeping," in Pines, *A World without a U.N.*, p. 155.) The point is well taken, but surely it cannot be offered as a criticism of UN peacekeeping!

serve to rejuvenate the peace and security mechanisms of the organization but perhaps also contribute to an easing of the current tension between the two superpowers. One highly visible indication of superpower support for UN peacekeeping would be the inclusion under appropriate circumstances of U.S. and Soviet contingents in UN peacekeeping forces.

Specific institutional reforms in the functioning of the Security Council are also required, but they are meaningless in the absence of substantive agreement and will be achieved more readily in the wake of substantive agreement.

Administrative performance

If the public at large has been disappointed by the United Nations in the field of peace and security, government officials in the United States are particularly exercised by its administrative performance. Assessing the United Nations in such terms, however, is no easy task, because there is very little systematic evidence to go on, and even if there were, it is difficult to know what to compare the United Nations to. No other organization anywhere operates on the basis of six official languages, with 159 autonomous constituencies and programs in just about every country in the world. Nonetheless, I focus on those issues which most concern U.S. policy makers: budgetary and personnel policies, and the politicization of the specialized agencies.

Budgetary policy

Total annual contributions (assessed and voluntary) to the UN system now stand at roughly \$4 billion. The United States is the largest contributor, paying about one-fourth of the total, almost as much as the next four contributors combined (Japan, the Federal Republic of Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands). The three Soviet republics are ranked seventh, contributing slightly over \$160 million. On a per capita basis, the United States ranked eighteenth in 1982, contributing less than \$4.50 per man, woman, and child, or half the contribution of Switzerland (which is not a UN member), about 12 percent of the per capita contribution of Norway, and less than Gabon and several other developing countries. The Soviet Union ranked sixty-fifth, contributing less than fifty cents per capita.¹⁵ Ultimately, whether the United Nations is worth this level of expenditure on the part of the United States depends on important value judgments about what \$1 billion, or \$4.50 per capita, ought to purchase in terms of U.S. and UN objectives, compared to other means that may be available to achieve the same ends. In purely

15. Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations, "Total Contributions of Member States to the United Nations System, 1982" (New York, October 1983).

financial terms, though, the United States obtains a return on its investment, directly through procurement in the United States by UN agencies (especially UNDP, UNICEF, and General Services, all of which are located in the United States, are headed by Americans, and purchase a sizable portion of all UN goods and services), and indirectly by virtue of being the site of UN headquarters. According to widely cited estimates, the United Nations contributes some \$700 million per year to the economy of the New York metropolitan region alone.¹⁶

Quite apart from the level of overall contributions to the United Nations are the issues of the efficiency and effectiveness of UN programs. Program planning and budgeting are still largely pro forma activities in the United Nations, systematic program and project evaluation is in its infancy, and the machinery for project auditing is inadequate. Although fragmentary data exist and anecdotal evidence is adduced in support of all manner of claims, it is, as a result, quite simply impossible to make a systematic, comprehensive assessment.¹⁷ That this is so indicates a major weakness. It suggests that wastage, duplication of effort, and slack management exist, particularly in the economic and social sectors, where UN activities have grown fastest in recent years and which account for some nine-tenths of the entire expenditures of the system. Equally serious is the extreme fragmentation of programs and projects in the economic and social sectors, so that it is sheer euphemism to refer to a UN "system" at all.

In the final analysis, however, the hostility that the budgetary policies of the United Nations has aroused in some circles is not due to size, growth, and inefficiency alone. An important political issue is also at stake: the asymmetry between financial contributions and control over budgetary allocations. This issue pits "have" against "have not" nations; the former account for the overwhelming share of contributions and the latter for the overwhelming share of votes. The problem is endemic, and mutual restraint is the only mutually beneficial solution. The UN secretariat has, however, contributed to the problem on more than one occasion. It has done so by being unduly responsive to certain highly contentious legislative mandates adopted by the General Assembly, for example, on Palestinian and southern African problems and in connection with aspects of the New International Economic Order. It has exploited and even initiated such mandates for its own ends, to expand its bureaucratic tasks and generate revenue. More simply, the secretariat has secured increases in its own salaries and benefits in excess of comparable remuneration at national levels.

16. Elliott L. Richardson, testimony before the Human Rights and International Organization Subcommittee, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 27 September 1983. The figure is also used by the New York City Commission for the United Nations.

17. For a well-informed and objective analytical overview of some of these issues, see Maurice Bertrand, "Political, Conceptual, and Technical Constraints on the Effectiveness of the United Nations" (paper presented at the Ford Foundation Conference on International Organizations, New York City, 7–8 November 1984).

Personnel policy

The ideal form of an international civil service was diluted in the United Nations right from the start. The great powers began immediately to jostle for senior secretariat positions for their nationals. The Soviet Union persistently accused Trygve Lie, the first secretary general, of pro-Western bias, in an effort to inspire fear along with the awe in which he already held the Soviet Union. And McCarthyism in the United States spilled over to impugn the loyalty of U.S. citizens working for the United Nations. Hence current American criticism of UN personnel policy cannot in all good conscience claim that there was ever a period in which staffing in the United Nations was not in substantial measure subject to “political” factors. The major difference between past and present is that the developing countries now play a much larger role in the international politics of UN personnel.¹⁸

The very principle of an international civil service is denied, however, by Soviet staffing practice. The Soviet Union oversteps the already diluted standards of propriety by considering UN secretariat officials of Soviet nationality to be mere extensions of the Soviet state apparatus. The USSR does not allow its nationals to accept permanent contracts from the United Nations. Soviets in the secretariat are required to maintain extraordinarily close links with their UN Mission. The Soviet Union appears to target for its nationals specific positions in the secretariat which are particularly useful for its own propaganda and intelligence-gathering purposes. Sometimes these activities go well beyond routine monitoring of publicly available sources of information. There is little that the United Nations can do directly to compel the Soviet Union to desist. It is disconcerting, however, when senior secretariat officials, given the opportunity to take a principled stand, side with Soviet practice instead—as they did in the celebrated case of Vladimir Yakimetz, in which the United Nations now risks being overruled by the World Court.¹⁹

Apart from the questions of who gets what post and what is done to advance the cause of particular candidates or nationalities is the issue of staff

18. Recruitment, of course, is not a complete free-for-all but is governed by Article 101 of the Charter. The article calls for “the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity” with due regard to the importance of wide geographical distribution, which now is itself a composite of membership, financial contribution, population, and other factors.

19. Yakimetz resigned from the Soviet government and applied for asylum in the United States to enable him to keep his secretariat post beyond the time limit set for him by the Soviets. Nevertheless, the secretary general refused to extend Yakimetz’s contract. Yakimetz lost two administrative appeals, but then an appeals committee comprised of government representatives decided to let his case go before the World Court. The secretary general held that Yakimetz had no claim to a career appointment because he had been sent on loan by his government for a fixed period. This, of course, is the only condition under which Soviet nationals can join the UN secretariat. The senior secretariat official in charge of personnel argued further that this Soviet practice, in essence, is no different from the universal practice of periodically “seconding” national officials to the UN secretariat (see the letter to the editor of the *New York Times* by Patricio Ruedas, UN undersecretary general for administration and management, 15 January 1984). By this logic, then, Soviet practice became the norm rather than the deviant case.

performance once on the job. Here the situation is analogous to the cost-effectiveness of UN programs: very little of a systematic and comprehensive nature is known, and in a well-managed organization more would be known. The United Nations is beginning to develop the form of a personnel policy by requiring competitive examinations at the lowest entry levels on the professional ladder and by periodic routine evaluations of performance for all professional levels thereafter. But there still exists no effective personnel policy in substance, leading to staff qualifications and performance that have the secretary general himself concerned.²⁰

The specialized agencies

Traditionally, activities of the specialized agencies have received little public notice. Of late, however, they have become the object of considerable media and official scrutiny. In the United States this shift has been prodded by several criticisms. The first is that the agencies have become thoroughly politicized and have therefore compromised their technical missions. This argument is not without merit, yet the issue is more complex than it appears at first glance. Great care must be taken to distinguish between two very different kinds of politicization. One, concerning the principles governing an issue area, is inevitable and legitimate; the other, concerning the introduction of extraneous political issues into an issue area, is neither. Take, as an illustration, the case of the International Telecommunication Union. The basic rules concerning allocation of the frequency spectrum and registration of frequency bands were determined by the industrialized countries to suit their particular needs, on a first-come, first-served basis. As the frequency spectrum has become more crowded, both because of the rapid growth of telecommunications services and the trebling of membership in the ITU, the developing countries (not surprisingly) have challenged the prevailing principles of allocation. They have sought to replace them with principles that more effectively protect their own long-term interests.

To challenge a principle of allocation in any social system is, of course, an act of "politicization," particularly when the challenge is accompanied by rhetorical flourishes, as it is in the case in the ITU, calling for a "new international information and communication order." There is nothing whatever perverse or illegitimate about this activity, however; Americans would do precisely the same were the United States in the disadvantaged position. Appropriate compromises will, we may presume, be worked out in such contexts, as indeed they are beginning to be in the ITU.²¹

The threshold of admissibility is crossed, however, when governments or

20. *Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization, 1983 (A/38/1)*.

21. Paul Lewis, "Geneva Parley Agrees on a Radio Plan," *New York Times*, 12 February 1984.

groups of governments seek to exploit a technical forum purely for the pursuit of political objectives that have no direct bearing on that realm. Even at the height of the Cold War, East and West managed to circumscribe their ever-present desire to engage in this practice; but the developing countries seem to have been less successful in restraining themselves. In some ultimate sense, everything may well be related to everything else in international politics; acting on this premise in UN agencies, however, produces organizational paralysis, not reform.

The recent UNESCO crisis has brought to public attention another problem afflicting the specialized agencies: once executive heads are appointed, there are relatively few effective internal checks and balances on their behavior. The UNESCO case may be extreme, combining, as it apparently does, autocratic leadership, gross cronyism, the explicit abandonment of impartiality, and questionable financial practices.²² Still, the more general problem is potentially present in all UN agencies: effective and accountable leadership depends too much on individual professionalism and integrity and not enough on institutionalized restraints. Existing restraints, such as they are, are inadequate for two reasons. First, executive heads are not responsible on a day-to-day basis to any legislative body or executive board; both meet too infrequently to perform such a supervisory role. Second, there exists a symbiotic relationship between the executive heads of international agencies and officials in national ministries who serve as delegates to the governing bodies of those agencies. The two can be of enormous assistance to each other in allocating resources and advancing their respective careers. As a result, the governors are not always eager to govern, and the sole mechanism of accountability that does exist can be too easily compromised.

A third and final point of contention concerns the perennial problem of overlap and duplication in the programmatic activities of UN agencies. The record shows that interagency coordination is marginally more effective today than it was in the past. The record also shows, however, that the problem ultimately cannot be solved at the interagency level. After all, it was not international bureaucrats but national governments that established (as one example) no fewer than four international agencies dealing with food and agriculture alone. Nor is it only officials of international agencies who ignore requests by various central UN organs to coordinate their activities in similar domains. The governing boards of the separate agencies, consisting of national officials, jealously guard the piece of institutional turf for which they are responsible, even against the wishes of their own foreign offices for more efficiency and less duplication.

One constant theme runs through this discussion of UN budgetary and

22. Gordon Crovitz, "Auditing M'Bow: Where the Trail Should Lead," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 1984, and personal interviews.

personnel policies, as well as the special problems of the agencies. The United Nations may have become too much of a bureaucracy in the current, pejorative sense of the term, but it is not enough of a bureaucracy in the classic, analytical sense: a system of rationalized authority and administrative relations, capable of rising above particularism and personalism, following generalized rules of procedure, and held strictly accountable on the basis of objective performance criteria. To some extent the United Nations is prevented from becoming more “bureaucratized” in this latter, positive sense by the very nature of the international polity and the particular alignments that prevail within it. Nonetheless, resolution of some of these problems is possible, particularly in budgetary and management techniques, as well as personnel and career development policy.²³ If the proper lessons are learned from the UNESCO affair, it may become possible to invent and institute more effective governing structures in UN agencies as well.

U.S. Policy

American power and resources first breathed life into the many postwar multilateralist schemes, including the United Nations. Subsequently, the United States and the United Nations worked in tandem, over the opposition of the major colonial powers, to catalyze and facilitate decolonization. For the first quarter century or so, U.S. foreign policy included a routine if not central part for the United Nations. It is ironic, therefore, that the United States now plays the multilateral game less effectively than many other states. American leaders tend to focus blame exclusively on the United Nations, but a dispassionate assessment also calls for an examination of the posture and performance of the United States.

One is struck first of all by the inability of the United States to define and maintain any kind of strategic orientation toward the United Nations. The Soviet Union looks to the organization as a vehicle to delegitimize the postwar international order constructed by the capitalist nations, while retaining its own political prerogatives to act unconstrained by multilateral obligations. The Third World seeks to liquidate the remnants of colonialism and upgrade its position in the international division of labor. The small European states support the United Nations as a potential agency of peaceful change in the face of international forces over which they have no control. Their larger European neighbors see the United Nations as a forum that to some extent endows them with a status and influence they no longer enjoy in the world at large. But what of the United States? Put simply, the visions being debated

23. For a brief review of recent attempts in this regard, see *Issues before the 39th General Assembly of the United Nations* (New York: United Nations Association of the USA, 1984), chap. 7.

in UN forums today are the visions of others, not our own. Few can recall the last time the United States initiated a major new action in the United Nations. Our posture toward the organization recently has oscillated wildly between accommodationism, rejectionism, and pragmatism, but at no time has it been guided by a clear strategic concept of the potential contribution of the United Nations to the kind of world order we desire.

American ambivalence toward the United Nations is reflected in and reinforced by the radically divergent political persuasions and personal styles of recent U.S. permanent representatives. Additional problems arise because the U.S. permanent representative is not simply an ambassador but also a member of the president's cabinet. In theory, this arrangement should enhance the importance of the United Nations in the highest circles of the U.S. government. In practice, it gives the permanent representative merely the hope or the illusion of influence in Washington, often to the detriment of his or her job performance in New York. Moreover, cabinet rank puts far too much visibility and pressure on the permanent representative in the domestic political arena; the essence of effective diplomacy requires that an ambassador be shielded from such exposure. Finally, having the permanent representative in the cabinet gives those who would use the United Nations to abuse the United States a direct line into the White House. There is no reason why Americans should be so obliging.

U.S. ambivalence toward the United Nations is reflected in another attribute of our representation at the United Nations. Only intermittently does America engage in the kind of political give-and-take at the United Nations at which Americans excel in their domestic legislative bodies—and when we do, we surprise ourselves (but not others) with our successes. Were we to choose to become more extensively engaged in UN corridor politics, however, we would be handicapped by Washington's relative neglect of U.S. missions to the United Nations in the designing of attractive career lines for foreign service officers and their counterparts in other agencies of the U.S. government.

Despite the many strains, there continues to exist a reservoir of goodwill and support for the United Nations in the American public. Public support is not as strong as it was in the past. According to a Roper Poll commissioned by UNA-USA and conducted in mid-1983, however, respondents felt, by a margin of two to one, that the United Nations is compatible with U.S. interests, not inimical to them. A majority, moreover, favored maintaining or increasing the present level of U.S. involvement in the United Nations rather than decreasing it.²⁴ It seems, therefore, that the current malaise about the United Nations is more pronounced among decision-making elites in

24. Results of the 1983 Roper Poll commissioned by UNA-USA, "Directions for the UN: US Public Opinion on the United Nations," background paper prepared by UNA-USA (New York, September 1983).

the United States than it is within the public at large. The posture and performance of those elites is in fact, as I have suggested, part of the problem.

Conclusion

The theme that emerges from these considerations is unlikely to satisfy opponents of the United Nations; nor is it likely to make any remaining idealist supporters happy. Critics will see it as too friendly, and friends as too critical. The problems, however, are far too important to be left either to uncritical friends or unfriendly critics. Any crisis of multilateralism is a crisis of humankind, for the human agenda is coming to be dominated by more, not fewer, issues of global proportions. International institutions can resolve none of these issues on their own, but neither can national states resolve them without international institutions. For better or worse, then, we are condemned to improve existing international institutions or to invent new ones to take their place.

I have discussed only two dimensions of the vast and complex UN system.²⁵ The pattern adduced in this context, however, can probably be generalized: the effectiveness and efficiency of the United Nations must be substantially enhanced, but any improvement in the current state of affairs will require detailed reviews of individual organizations, program areas, and even programs. In other words, the current policy debate must shift from symbols to specifics. Greater satisfaction with the United Nations by the United States will also require a greater sense of vision and consistency in the policies and tactics of this country. If the intellectual capital necessary to help bring about these shifts is to be available, and if the quality of public discourse in this domain is to be raised, professional students of international organization and journals such as this one will have to play their part—which is to rejuvenate the systematic study of the structure and functioning of institutions in the contemporary world system.

25. A close examination of recent UN activities in the economic sector, especially the increasingly ritualistic “negotiations” between North and South, together with recommended changes, can be found in Jagdish N. Bhagwati and John Gerard Ruggie, eds., *Power, Passions, and Purpose* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).