Arts & Humanities

Cracks in the Foundation

Supporters and critics agree that the United Nations needs an overhaul in its 60th year. Six Columbia insiders assess the damage and tell us where repairs should begin.

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The United Nations convened its 60th session last fall, providing an occasion both to celebrate and critique the institution.

Since its inception following World War II, the UN has evolved from an institution to prevent war into an umbrella organization coordinating efforts in human rights, international justice, trade, economic development, world health, child welfare, women's rights, environmental protection, scientific research, and intellectual property.The UN has been praised for helping eliminate apartheid in South Africa, coordinating the mammoth relief effort in response to the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, and setting benchmarks for combating global poverty, hunger, and disease, as part of its Millennium Development Goals. The UN's credibility, however, has been damaged in recent years. Its oil-for-food program in Iraq collapsed amidst allegations of corruption, its peacekeepers stand accused of raping civilians, and its ineffective human-rights commission underwent a controversial overhaul in March. To remain relevant, the UN must undertake more reforms, experts say.

The Columbia University community has a long history of working with the United Nations. Architect Max Abramovitz '31APP designed the organization's New York City headquarters, staunch anticommunist Jeane Kirkpatrick '48BC, '68GSAS served as U.S. ambassador to the UN under Ronald Reagan, and Madeleine Albright '68GSAS, '76GSAS, '95HON held the same post under Bill Clinton.

"There is hardly a school at Columbia, from SIPA to public health to nursing, from business to law, that does not have important programs in developing countries," says Lisa Anderson, dean of Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs. Indeed, the story of the UN is in many ways a Columbia story.

Economist Jeffrey Sachs, who directs Columbia's Earth Institute, currently is a special advisor to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Sachs heads the United Nations' Millennium Project, which is analyzing policy options and developing practical strategies for implementing the Millennium Development Goals.

To look broadly at the United Nations' future as an institution, we recently spoke to several other prominent Columbians who have studied, reported on, or worked with the UN in the past.

Madeleine Albright

Madeleine Korbel Albright served as the first U.S. female secretary of state, from 1997 to 2001, and was the U.S. ambassador to the UN from 1993 to 1997. She received her MA from Columbia in 1968, her PhD in public law and government in 1976, and an honorary doctor of laws degree in 1995.

In 2003 the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) honored her with the Andrew Wellington Cordier Award for Distinguished Public Service for her "strong commitment to public service and to developing constructive U.S. policies abroad." Albright worked with her former Columbia mentor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, as a member of Jimmy Carter's National Security Council and White House staffs. She taught at Georgetown University from 1982 until 1992. She is now a principal of The Albright Group, a global strategy firm in Washington.

Local Reform

What the United Nations needs most immediately is support from the U.S. There is not enough recognition in this country of the UN's importance to national security policy and foreign policy. The fact is, it is good for the U.S. to be a part of it. Part of the problem is that the U.S. is not there as a cooperative player, but more as a scold.We also helped create an artificial financial crisis because of the dues we owed over the years.The U.S. has to be part of the solution, not the problem. We have to help the UN reach fiscal responsibility, not undercut its efforts to do so.

Some have proposed the idea of moving the UN out of the U.S. I have a feeling that if the UN were to leave, we would be even less inclined to be helpful. I would not

want to see the headquarters moved out of New York. That might solidify the sense of those who don’t like it, people who would see it as some organization based in a foreign country, full of foreigners.

I don’t think people are aware of how robust a lot of the UN’s peacekeeping activities actually are.There are a number of UN personnel in the field, both military and civilian, and there needs to be a recognition of the really important role the UN plays when individual countries are not willing to step up. That understanding needs to be strengthened.

A Mission to Accomplish

Of course, there’s no question that the UN needs serious reform.While it’s flawed, we still need to make it work. Some of the suggestions that Secretary-General Annan announced [in early March], which take a bottom-up look at how the Secretariat should be run, are very useful. Ideas such as taking certain functions out of New York and trying to find the best practices make a lot of sense, although the implementation is not without its difficulties. This was evident from the reaction that he's been getting within the UN itself.

One of the comments the secretary-general made a few months ago is that he's supposed to be the "chief diplomat of the world" and run the UN on the side. That means that there needs to be some kind of operating officer, somebody who is capable and who has a mandate to run the place. Secretaries-general — and I don't mean only this one — are individuals who are viewed as having stronger diplomatic skills than administrative ones.

Has the UN fulfilled the bulk of its mission? No, one the contrary, it was not able to do its work during the whole Cold War because it was paralyzed. It was *beginning* to fulfill some of its mission, I thought, in the 1990s, when people understood its overall importance. We pushed then for reform and at the same time understood that the UN could do things we couldn't do unilaterally or didn't want to do unilaterally. So, no, it hasn't fulfilled its mission, but with serious reform it has the potential to do so.

George Mitchell

Former senator George Mitchell (D-ME), a senior fellow of SIPA's Center for International Conflict Resolution, served in the Senate from 1980 to 1995 and was the majority leader from 1989 to 1995. In 1998 he was chairman of the peace negotiations in Northern Ireland; his Good Friday peace accord was signed by Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland. In 2001, President Bill Clinton appointed Mitchell chair of the Sharm el- Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee to investigate the September 2000 Al- Aqsa Intifada. The committee's recommendations on ending violence between Israel and Palestine, widely known as the Mitchell Report, were endorsed by the Bush administration, the European Union, and many other governments.

At the request of the U.S. Congress in December 2004, Mitchell cochaired a bipartisan task force on reforming the UN.The committee was organized by the U.S. Institute of Peace and consisted of members from public policy groups such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Heritage Foundation. Mitchell and co-chair Newt Gingrich (R-GA), former Speaker of the House of Representatives, released their exhaustive report, American Interests and UN Reform, in June 2005.

The UN responded to the task force report with an outcome document at the September 2005 World Summit in New York. Mitchell and Gingrich published a follow-up to the outcome document in December."It fell significantly short of the recommendations made by our own Task Force," they wrote, but concluded that "UN reform is a process, not an event."

A Matter of Perspective

It's important to recall that the U.S. took the lead in the creation of the UN after World War II, the most destructive con- flict in all of history. Only in the U.S. is there substantial and vocal hostility to the UN. The period since World War II has been one of great challenges, but also of remarkable progress, thanks in part to the UN. By contrast, in the 75 years prior to 1945, there were three major land wars in Europe. Since 1945, there have not been European conflicts on that scale (although there have been some, including, of course, the Balkan conflicts) and a fourth war between France and Germany is now unthinkable. Global stability is difficult to maintain, but the UN has been very helpful in peacekeeping efforts, which now

extend across the world. Between 1948 and 1990, the UN initiated some 18 peacekeeping operations. Between 1990 and today, the Security Council, with the support of the U.S., has initiated more than 40 peacekeeping operations.

The outcome document from the UN World Summit in 2005, in which the General Assembly responded to our report, was mixed. It can best be described as a series of steps in the right direction. Those who tend to disfavor the UN view the results in a negative light, and those who believe the UN can be an effective institution tend to view the steps in a more positive light. I believe it is far too early to write off the effort to reform the United Nations.That would misjudge the kind of sustained effort that will be required to overhaul the institution to meet the very different threats and challenges of this new century: the problems of failed states, catastrophic terrorism, the persistence of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, and the promotion of democracy.

Since the summit, there have been further efforts with respect to the issue of replacing the Human Rights Commission with a Human Rights Council.The outcome of that will be an important test of significant progress. But we should continue our efforts to achieve meaningful reform because I believe that the fundamental conclusion of our task force remains true:An effective UN is in the American national interest.

Who’s to Blame?

On balance, the UN remains beneficial and helpful. However, as our report points out, the UN at times is justifiably criticized. An example of this is, of course, the oil-for-food scandal. Regarding sexual harassment allegations both within the organization and in peacekeeping efforts, there is no accountability within the current management structure, since the secretarygeneral has no real authority over UN personnel. These are important issues to address, and our task force report made a number of recommendations, including the creation of an Office of Personnel Ethics. Other criticism of the UN would be more appropriately directed at the member states. If an individual member state vetoes a positive resolution, that vote should not be considered a flaw inherent to the UN. Let’s take the immediate case of Iran and its nuclear program. If the problem were to go to the Security Council, and China and Russia block meaningful action, would it be fair to consider

that a failure of the UN, or a result of a UN state that prevents the UN from doing its job?

Terrorism in a Post-9/11 World

The UN hasn't been very effective in countering terrorism because the member states are not even able to agree on a universal definition of terrorism. Additionally, its ineffectiveness is in part a consequence of the lack of effective steps by member states, including the U.S., and the decision by the Bush administration to wage war in Iraq without broad support within the Security Council. Even though the invasion was for the purpose of enforcing the Security Council's Resolution 1441 in November 2002, calling for Iraq to comply with its disarmament obligations, it was a massive failure of diplomacy. This was not only on the part of the U.S., but also on the part of its allies, notably Germany and France.

Looking Ahead

In most countries, the UN has the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval and has proved itself effective in peacekeeping efforts. Small and medium-size countries are often reluctant to act solely at the request of another country, but they are willing to act soley at the request of the UN. In this regard, the UN can act as a force multiplier and as a mechanism by which broad and international support can be obtained for better policies.The UN can be an effective organization. It has attempted to reduce violence in Sudan, Haiti, Liberia, and other countries, with mixed results. The UN can play a vital role in fighting HIV/AIDS, protecting refugees, tsunami relief, and promoting of democracy, to name a few examples. But to do so, it must act on reform in a serious and sustained way.

In the next 10 years I project that the UN will have made significant reforms. It's very important that it acts on the Human Rights Commission vs. Council issue. It's also crucial that the UN pay attention to management reform, particularly to the major steps that were in our report, such as the creation of an internal oversight board and policies to protect whistleblowers. While management reform tends to get less attention in the press, it's significant because if the institution doesn't make

meaningful management changes, the other reforms aren’t sustainable.

Claudia Rosett

Claudia Rosett ’79GSAS has reported on international affairs for more than 20 years. She is credited with breaking the story of the UN’s complicity in the oil-for-food scandal, in a series of dispatches beginning in 2002. From 1984 to 2002, Rosett was on the staff of theWall Street Journal, writing as an editorialist from Hong Kong and New York, and as a reporter and bureau chief in Moscow. Her on-site coverage of the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising in China earned her an Overseas Press Club Citation for Excellence. In 2005, for her coverage of the UN, she received the Eric Breindel Award. Rosett is currently journalist in residence with The Foundation for the Defense of Democracies.

Taking the Blame

The UN was a great notion and we would all like to see it live up to its ideals. Who wouldn’t want to promote world peace, help refugees, and promote democratic societies? The problem emerges from the UN’s structure.The UN is basically a big collective, with a highly ingrown bureaucracy, a load of vested interests, and no place where the buck really stops. Crony cliques do very well, but the whistle-blowers get in trouble. The UN therefore needs to be far, far more transparent than it has been. It is run the way dictatorships are run, with much secrecy and many presumptions of extraordinary privilege at the top.

Not one of the big scandals of the last few years has come to light by way of someone at the UN stepping up and saying, “Here’s what happened. We were wrong.” It was the press that exposed the rapes by peacekeepers in West Africa as well as the oil-for-food and procurement scandals.

The oil-for-food program was the biggest carnival of corruption in the history of humanitarian relief — and the UN presided over it. It involved bags of cash, kickbacks on thousands of UNapproved deals, terror connections, arms trafficking — you name it. From 1996 to 2003, the program fortified and enriched the regime of Saddam Hussein, who was the cause of Iraqi suffering in the first place. It allowed

him to siphon off anywhere from $12 billion to $17 billion or more that was supposed to go to relief for hungry Iraqis.The UN collected $1.4 billion worth of Hussein’s oil money for its own budget.There have been a number of investigations and congressional hearings documenting reasons why we should worry that some of those stolen oil-for-food funds may be bankrolling terrorism in Iraq even today.

Top UN officials, including Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who was in charge of the UN office that ran the program, knew of the corruption, but they didn’t stop it and didn’t tell us. That’s documented in Paul Volcker’s September 7, 2005, report on oilfor- food. Still, Annan has stated that stories in the press exposing UN corruption are unjustified attacks. He praised the program, ignored the graft, and insisted he had seen no evidence of wrongdoing by anyone on his staff, until Congress and the press forced him to authorize an investigation in 2004. He then spent $36 million of Iraq’s leftover oil-for-food relief money on the investigation led by Volcker.The report contained detailed allegations that the head of the program, Benon Sevan, took money from Hussein.What happened to Sevan? He denied the allegations and has been allowed to retire with a full UN pension to Cyprus, out of reach of U.S. prosecutors.

Shirking Duties

We have entrusted the UN with much more than it can safely manage, and not just financially. Mohamed ElBaradei of the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) just won the Nobel Peace Prize. For what? While the UN has been celebrating, Iran has moved ahead with its nuclear bomb program. North Korea already has nuclear bombs; when that issue arrived before the UN Security Council in 2003, China and Russia vetoed it right back out. Nor has the UN stepped up to the plate to help the hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees who have been fleeing to China, where the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Beijing lets Chinese security agents make sure no refugees ever reach its door, as private aid workers can tell you. Instead, China sends these asylum seekers back to North Korea, where some of them will be shot in public executions. At the same time, China sits piously on the UN Refugee Agency’s executive committee and the UN keeps quiet because it does not want to offend the Chinese dictatorship.

These ironies are everywhere. The classic example is the Commission on Human Rights, which is packed with some of the world's worst human-rights violators: The Commission was chaired three years ago by Libya; this year, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, and Zimbabwe are among those onboard. We've seen the UN complaining about Guantanamo, but what has it done to release the names of the prisons holding democratic dissidents in Saudi Arabia, in Cuba, in Libya?

The UN's True Purpose?

There is now a huge scandal unfolding concerning UN procurement contracts. One UN official has already pleaded guilty to federal charges of graft and money laundering. In a related indictment of the head of the UN's own budget oversight committee, Vladimir Kuznetsov has pleaded not guilty. The UN's internal auditors have found signs of shady deals involving hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of contracts for supplies to UN peacekeeping troops. Yet the General Assembly has responded with outrage — not over the corruption, but over the fact that word of it leaked out without their say-so. Until the organization becomes more transparent, there is no incentive for reform. The auditors themselves warned about the UN's "culture of impunity."Who is responsible? Or, more to the point, what do we do when no one will truly accept responsibility?

What is the UN really here for? Was it founded to provide jobs for people who are well connected in their countries back home to come live well in New York? Was it intended to be a platform for self-promoting economists? Was it meant to be an organization devoted chiefly to protecting its own reputation, regardless of the realities? If we were setting up the UN today,would it look like the organization that has metastasized over the past 60 years, or would it look more like the kind of open, democratic institutions it was founded — in theory — to protect?

Louis Henkin

In 1962 Louis Henkin joined the Columbia Law School faculty and the faculty of the department of political science in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and SIPA. He was named Hamilton Fish Professor of International Law and Diplomacy and, later, Harlan Fiske Stone Professor of Constitutional Law. Henkin is chair of the

directorate of the Columbia University Center for the Study of Human Rights, and founding chair and director of the Law School's Institute of Human Rights. In his honor the Law School established the Louis Henkin Professorship in Human Rights.

Henkin was a consultant to the United Nations Legal Department in 1945. He then served with the Department of State from 1948 to 1956 in the UN Bureau and in the Office of European Regional Affairs (NATO). He represented the U.S. on the committee drafting the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and was part of the U.S. delegations to the UN and to international conferences.

A History Lesson

The creation of the UN has to be seen in a historical perspective. Since its earliest times, the U.S. indulged in a period of "isolationism," which it maintained after World War I.The U.S. did not join the League of Nations despite President Woodrow Wilson's wishes. However, Pearl Harbor and World War II forced a change. In January 1942, a month after Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave his "Four Freedoms" speech to Congress, in which he said the world should be founded upon four essential human freedoms — freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

No longer isolationist, the U.S. joined a world that adhered to these four freedoms, which are reflected in the UN Charter. For example, freedom from fear meant protecting the world against the next Hitler. Freedom from want became the economic and social development aspect of the UN's work. The Charter was approved as a treaty of the U.S. by probably the largest majority of any treaty in our history.

U.S. Security

The U.S. insisted that the Security Council established by the UN Charter should have five "permanent members," of which the U.S. was one, and that a vote from each of these members would be essential to pass a resolution. The Security Council could make important decisions, but the General Assembly could make only

recommendations. Some of the smaller nations wanted a different treaty, but the U.S. said it would join only if the five permanent members — the U.S., the Russian Federation (then the Soviet Union), France, China, and the United Kingdom — retained a veto. The structure of the UN recognized the preeminence of those five members. In other words, the U.S. was able to join the UN and assume a leadership role on its own terms.

Mobilizing Change

The UN has been effective in what is known as “mobilizing shame.” It is amazing how countries do not want to be shamed and alienated from the rest of the world.This strategy was effective in eliminating apartheid. The U.S. seeks to use it increasingly in respect to Iran, but the Iran story is a work in progress. If the Security Council authorizes sanctions against Iran, Iran would not like it. It does not have the veto, and it does not have a lot of friends.

Much has changed since 9/11.The word terrorism is not in the UN Charter. Today the world also faces the issue of torture. One needs to define these issues and decide how to react to them. The General Assembly remains a place for discussion in hopes of achieving consensus on these and other issues.

The question of what countries should be among the “big five,” as we call the permanent members of the Security Council, has changed. During the last 60 years, the UN has moved from 50-odd states to 191 member states and has seen the end of colonialism. The world has changed, and therefore the UN institution has evolved in that context.

The hope for changing the UN is to increase the membership of particular bodies in the UN. What has not changed is that the only UN body that has the authority to tell nations what to do is the Security Council. The threat of Security Council action still exists and is still effective. Nations do not want to see themselves as violators. While some states are more troubled by this than others are, no state would wish to be declared a violator of the Charter.

The UN has evolved and continues to do so. The U.S. and other member states are bound by the UN Charter and are committed to its authority. It can threaten or recommend legal or political action. But mobilizing shame is the principal weapon of

the international political system, and the UN has not been reluctant to exercise that ability and it has not been ineffective.

Edward Luck

Edward Luck ’01GSAS is professor in the practice of international affairs, director of the Center on International Organization of SIPA, and an expert on foreign policy, UN reform, and peacekeeping. He began working with the UN in 1974 when he joined the United Nations Association of the USA (UNAUSA), a center for public education on the UN. He was president and CEO of the UNA-USA from 1984 to 1994, and president emeritus from 1994 to 1998. From 1994 to 1997 Luck was a senior consultant to the Department of Administration and Management of the UN, and staff director of the General Assembly’s Open-Ended High-Level Working Group on the Strengthening of the United Nations System. In those roles he was a key figure in the UN reform process. Along with reform, Luck’s research includes disarmament, international law, and UN policies toward terrorism and counterterrorism.

Steady Progress

The UN has done rather well at norm building in areas as diverse as human rights, decolonization, disarmament, humanitarian affairs, development, and democracy. Its record in fulfilling these aspirations and enforcing these standards has, not surprisingly, been uneven and, too often, decidedly modest. Fortunately, governments, regional arrangements, and a host of nongovernmental partners have helped pick up the slack. Overall, the world seems to be making real, if slow, progress on a number of these fronts. The number of wars, casualties, and refugees continues to decline.

The UN’s prime objective — to prevent a third world war — has held for more than six decades, thanks to a range of factors and actors.

Progress in development has been uneven, but tens of millions have been able to rise out of poverty and life expectancy is growing for much of the world. Human rights and democratic values are more widely respected than ever before.Who even thought they should be universally observed before there was a UN?

In part because of the UN’s efforts as the world’s premier convener, our expectations are rising, as are the standards we set for the world body. The UN’s glass may be only half full, but, if we take a historical perspective, there is little doubt that it is filling, drop by drop.We should be dissatisfied and continue to call for wider and deeper reform, not as punishment for bad behavior, but because we care about what the UN is trying to do and have a stake in its success. Its resources will inevitably be limited, so it is doubly important that they be used wisely and honestly.

History of Reform

The effort to reform the UN began at its founding conference in San Francisco more than 60 years ago and has never stopped. As a result, much of the UN’s work today — peacekeeping, election monitoring, setting environmental standards, and counterterrorism — would be unfamiliar to the founders.They never conceived of a virtually universal organization of 191 disparate member states, with scores of functional and humanitarian agencies, and with such an ambitious and seemingly open-ended agenda. They would recognize, however, the problems such dimensions pose for coherent and accountable management, for reaching consensus on priorities, and for gathering collective will and resources to take on pressing global issues.

All of these problems were faced in San Francisco or shortly after the organization’s birth, but all have proven to be endemic to such an ambitious global undertaking. Reform — the effort to find better ways to forward the UN’s purposes — has therefore proven to be a never-ending, ever-frustrating, but always essential task. Each round of reform produces some forward movement, often in places where it is least expected, as well as the foundation for the next round. Those seeking quick solutions and easy answers should find some other line of work.

A Clearer Future?

If nothing else, it is essential that the current round of reform result in more transparent, accountable, and credible management. One oil-for-food scandal is one too many. The fact that the member states are more to blame than the Secretariat

for the disaster does not in any way lessen the organization’s collective responsibility for designing and overseeing a program that was bound to undermine the world body’s integrity, even as it fed Iraqi children. Hopefully the right lessons are being learned, and the new whistle-blower protections already appear to be bearing fruit. In the short run, the UN’s dirty linen will be exposed for all to see, but in the long run, the integrity of the body should be restored. Once again, the organization that could outlast the Cold War and outlive its early skeptics will prove to be a survivor. It will survive not because it performs so well or delivers so much, but because peoples and countries need the hope it provides for a better way.

Michael Doyle

Michael Doyle has a joint appointment at SIPA and the Columbia Law School and is the Harold Brown Professor of U.S. Foreign and Security Policy. He is an authority on United Nations peacekeeping and international relations and was a special adviser to Kofi Annan from 2001 to 2003. In that position, he was a key negotiator in the formulation of UN policy on issues of internal migration. He also helped create the Millennium Development Goals, with their numerous targets and indicators for addressing the needs of the world’s poorest populations.Doyle is the chair of the Academic Council of the United Nations Community and in January was named to the Columbia Committee on Global Thought, a new initiative charged with building a program for the study of globalization. He represents the secretary-general on the advisory board of the recently established UN Democracy Fund.

Mission Statement

In 1945, there was a spirit of cooperation among the nations united against the Axis, which doesn’t exist today. Now, there is a disharmony among nations, and if you wanted to create a UN today with the existing level of multilateralism, I doubt if you could. The UN, in its basics, is valuable and in many ways is more important than it’s ever been before. Its mission has expanded greatly.When the UN was started, the role of the secretary- general had a modest definition, but now it’s grown to be that of one of the world’s chief diplomats.The UN has taken on the jobs of setting norms on development issues, peacekeeping, refugee protection, humanitarian assistance,

health concerns, and human rights.When the international community wants something to be done, and no one member state is able to do it, the UN has been able to step in — humanitarian assistance for the refugees from Afghanistan who fled the Taliban or after the civil wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, for example.

Flawed and Tarnished

The UN is far from perfect. It’s a large, creaking bureaucracy. Scandals like the oil-for-food program should be taken seriously yet looked at objectively.The Volcker Report, the UN commissioned investigation of oil-for-food, turned up one UN Secretariat individual who allegedly received a kickback, but it didn’t discover significant internal corruption.The interim press coverage, particularly in the right-wing press, has hurt the institution. Obviously, public perception of the UN was harmed, and perception is more influential than the reality of the situation.

Above Suspicion?

Like the papacy or the World Council of Churches, the UN’s influence comes from the recognition of its broader legitimacy rather than from the fact that it picks up the garbage every Thursday or makes a profit for shareholders. The UN is most effective when it’s transparent. It’s not like the government, where some functions, such as intelligence and espionage, require secrecy to be effective.A recent example is the tsunami relief effort. The UN announced at the beginning that all of the monies would be audited, and that any misuse would be made public. That elicited more donations than if the funds had been opaque or not subject to intensive monitoring.The Volcker Report played an extremely important and valuable role — it was necessary for the UN to be thoroughly investigated in order to defend itself against the wider charges. Just like Caesar’s wife, the UN has to be above suspicion if it’s going to be influential.

Progress Through Compromise

One of the UN’s pressing concerns is the formation of a Human Rights Council, which would replace the controversial and discredited Human Rights Commission. The negotiations are an example of the complex reform process. The U.S. is opposed to a resolution that would allow member states to gain a seat with a simple majority versus a two-thirds vote.The latter would make it clearer that the candidates on the Council had very broad support in the General Assembly, and that’s useful. On the other hand, what is more important is how the Council behaves — and that’s not determined by whether it’s a 50 percent or two-thirds vote. Some human rights organizations are concerned about reopening the talks to line-by-line negotiations, which is a relevant concern. If that happens, it may be difficult to get a document as good as the one we have now, since the dynamics of the negotiations are different at each point in time. But the key question is whether there is a will to make human rights a feature in determining UN policy in the world.We won’t know that until the Council actually meets and begins to act.

Today, the UN is hamstrung by concerns over terrorism,U.S. hegemony, and challenges of decolonization. One has to be patient. But there is now momentum for reform, and I am hopeful this momentum can be sustained. I’m hopeful that the UN, over time, will become a more effective institution.



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >