The State of US-UN Relations
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Introduction
As the United States seeks international support for actions related to the war against terrorism, the US-UN relationship has undergone a significant transformation, providing both new opportunities and delicate challenges. On April 25-26, the Stanley Foundation brought together a group of experts from the United Nations, the US government, and the nongovernmental community to assess the state of the relationship. Participants explored the potential problem areas and specific steps that could be taken to avoid debilitating rifts. On the first night of the session, the group was joined for dinner by the US permanent representative to the United Nations, John Negroponte, and two of his deputies, Ambassadors Patrick Kennedy and Rich Williamson.

State of the Relationship
The US-UN relationship is marked with both controversy and complication. As one participant characterized it, “It changes from day to day. The relationship is one of envy and respect, of admiration and dissatisfaction.” There was broad agreement that the relationship dramatically improved following last summer’s payment of the second installment of US arrears. Many pointed to the president’s May 2002 announcement of the increase in US overseas development assistance at the Monterey Conference on Financing for Development as a further sign of positive progress. The administration’s pledge to increase foreign assistance was cited as a real paradigm shift, although some saw it as an anomaly made possible by domestic politics and personal connections.

In the post-September 11 context, the United States relies on the United Nations for validation, legitimacy, and political support for actions related to the international war on terrorism. The United Nations’ response to the terrorist attacks was unprecedented. With the passage and implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1373, many participants believed the United States and United Nations have converged on issues of counterterrorism, setting international precedents in the areas of law enforcement and financial cooperation. “The institutional UN groundwork is in place, and it complements nicely with where the US wants to go.” One participant noted that the United Nations needs to be associated with the US antiterror campaign in order to preserve its own legitimacy.

At the same time, the United Nations and its member states continue to look toward the United States for commitment and predictability. Participants stressed the importance that the United States be seen as playing by the same rules as the rest of the world. Member states have come to expect that the United States adhere to the consistent multilateral rules and processes at the United Nations. As one participant put it, “The world has come to expect US dominance, but it wants it done in a subtle way.” More than anything else,
the rest of the diplomatic community wants a measure of respect and dignity from the United States. However, the United States finds it increasingly difficult to bridge principles with practice, leading to a feeling of resentment in New York.

A number of participants emphasized the importance of personal relations between US and UN officials. While the bond between Kofi Annan and Colin Powell was specifically noted, others credited the low-key diplomatic style of the US permanent representative to the United Nations, John Negroponte, as a positive development in the everyday management of US-UN relations. A few participants highlighted the strong need for an American with close ties to the administration to serve in a high-level position close to the secretary-general. This could help temper the institution’s “liberal internationalist” political culture and free the secretary-general from the unhealthy burden of being the United Nations’ primary lobbyist in Washington. A concern was expressed that maintaining the under-secretary-general for management as an American position might only serve to reinforce the not always healthy US focus on these issues. If the United States does once again install an American, the Bush administration should not select an ideologue who might drag down the US-UN relationship with an overambitious reform agenda.

The popularity of Kofi Annan was noted as a tremendous asset for the organization. The group generally agreed that the secretary-general’s stature has continued to grow and reflect positively on the United Nations. One participant cautioned that “he doesn’t have any coattails. He seems to hover above the United Nations. He doesn’t make the UN more popular.” Regardless, all participants expressed great concern about the lack of a strong replacement and worried that the US-UN relationship would be adversely affected as a result. Now would be a good time for the United Nations to begin planning for the post-Annan period. One participant noted that while the secretary-general had spent most of his first term consolidating his political capital in Washington, in his second term, Annan is actively taking on hot-button issues—such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women—that could easily alienate several powerful constituencies. In doing so, he will need to be wary about crossing an “unseen line” and risking a backlash.

The group also discussed how the changing nature of transatlantic relations between the United States and its European allies would play out at the United Nations. While some believe the growing rift will be a source of significant problems, others argued that the unique transatlantic relationship would also serve as a counterweight “to prevent the US from jumping over the unilateralist cliff.” Kyoto and the ICC were cited as two examples where the United States has been unable to “bulldoze” the positions of its European allies. One participant commented that the problem was not merely a transatlantic divide, but rather a total disconnect between the United States and the rest of the world regarding American identity, power, and policies.

Participants had different assessments of what the United Nations can offer in the area of norm-building. Some pointed to convergence over the past decade on issues of human rights and democratization where the United Nations played a significant role in supporting new international norms. The process set up by Resolution 1373 could lead to comparable norms being set for cooperation on counterterrorism. Others argued
that the UN record on norm-building is mixed, and generally most of the problems the United Nations encounters are related to new norm-building exercises such as the ICC and the Rights of the Child. Pushing norms on terrorism at the United Nations would become embroiled in the context of the Middle East and inevitably lead to complications over the definition of terrorism.

Several issues raised by participants centered on the relationship between the US Congress and the United Nations. Many credited the dramatic improvement in relations to Ambassador Holbrooke’s efforts to lower the US assessment rates and settling much of the arrears problem. The change in administration was cited as another reason why many Republicans in Congress have been less antagonistic recently. There was broad agreement that constant engagement between the United Nations and Congress would serve the US-UN relationship well by reducing the risk of surprises and insulating the United Nations from the actions of its member states. Whether intentional or not, the group believed the US mission in New York is not conducting enough direct communication and dialogue with Capitol Hill.

Significant attention was paid to whether the time is ripe for the United States to rejoin UNESCO. Last year, the US House of Representatives passed an amendment authorizing the United States to rejoin the organization after an 18-year absence. Many in the group felt that with the high profile and important work the organization is currently doing in Afghanistan, now would be a good time to mobilize support for US re-entry. Rejoining UNESCO could be marketed as a palatable and relatively inexpensive way for the administration to rebut critics accusing it of being excessively unilateralist.

Participants disagreed about a proposal for the US government to spread responsibility and budgets for the United Nations among different federal agencies. Proponents argued that in addition to marginalizing substantive experts, the current structure stovepipes funds within the State Department. Citing the recent Department of Health and Human Services’ $100 million contribution to the Global HIV/AIDS Trust Fund, breaking up the State Department’s monopoly would lead to broader support for funding UN initiatives. However, others disagreed with the proposal, pointing out that splitting up the budget would also lead to the involvement of dozens of different congressional oversight and appropriations committees, as well as the various political constituencies interested in lobbying individual agencies.

**Potential Flashpoints**

Despite recent progress in the US-UN relationship, participants identified six potential flashpoints that could complicate matters in the near future. The political capital built up by the secretary-general and the United Nations could be easily depleted by one or several of the following issues:

**Middle East:** If the situation in the Middle East continues to escalate, participants agreed that the UN environment will become increasingly hostile toward the United States and Israel, causing great strain on the US-UN relationship. While the secretary-general opened the door to play a role in the conflict by acknowledging discrimination against Israel at the United Nations, participants cautioned that he was now on “hot coals.” One participant expressed nervousness that despite little prospect for success, Annan appeared...
eager to get engaged, as evidenced by the (ultimately abortive) investigation of Israeli actions in the Jenin refugee camp. The group agreed that the secretary-general should carefully coordinate and calibrate his actions with the Security Council in order to avoid political disaster.

**Afghanistan:** The Bonn agreement signed last December names the United Nations as the guarantor of the political process in Afghanistan. With the political attention already shifting away from reconstruction efforts in the country, many participants were concerned that the lack of available funding and the deteriorating security situation would make it impossible for the international community to make sustainable progress in Afghanistan. While Brahimi, UN special representative for Afghanistan, was commended for resisting to take on too many responsibilities, the group noted that following the departure of the International Security Assistance Force, the United Nations would still be expected to take responsibility for security functions it is currently incapable of handling.

**Iraq:** Participants were split on the degree to which Iraq could become a problem for the US-UN relationship. Some argued that UN efforts to restart a weapons monitoring regime would be seen as interference with the US agenda. The relationship would take a particularly contentious turn if UN inspectors remained in the country as the United States wanted to take unilateral military action. Others were less pessimistic, arguing that there was general international agreement on the need for action against Saddam Hussein. If the more problematic issue of the Middle East is resolved, military action against Iraq might gain a greater degree of international support.

**UN Conferences:** There was broad agreement that UN conferences would continue to pose significant problems for US-UN relations. Taking up issues sensitive to strong domestic constituencies, this year’s conferences on Children and Sustainable Development were identified as two potential diplomatic disasters. One participant explained that on issues in which domestic American constituencies have something at stake, it’s highly unlikely that the United States will be willing to negotiate or compromise. Furthermore, conferences are often used as a forum “for the world to get back at the US.” Recounting the experience at the Durban World Conference Against Racism last summer when the US delegation walked out in protest, participants raised strong concern that UN conferences were increasingly becoming venues for international theater. There was broad agreement that the United Nations needs to reassess both the number and management of future conferences.

**International Criminal Court (ICC):** Despite being separate institutions, the ICC is still seen as a UN project. With the recent coming into force of the Rome Treaty, the ICC is causing complications in the US Congress’s work on this year’s State Department Authorization Bill, which contains the legislative changes needed to allow the United States to meet its financial obligations to the United Nations. Some in Congress are also demanding US immunity from the ICC be built into all future UN Security Council resolutions authorizing peacekeeping missions. While many participants believe it’s too late for Annan to distance himself from the ICC, they expressed concern over the level of his visible support and association with the court.
Global HIV/AIDS Trust Fund: Like the ICC, the Global HIV/AIDS Trust Fund is a separate institution from the United Nations. However, in reality, Annan is seen as the public face of the fund. He was responsible for raising the profile of the issue and making appeals for funding. However, much remains to be done to ensure that the fund is an operational success. Welcomed with “blind enthusiasm,” expectations are soaring in Washington with many staking their political careers on supporting multi-million dollar contributions to the initiative. If the fund isn’t able to deliver results, it could seriously undermine the United Nations’ credibility.

The Reform Agenda
There was broad agreement that the UN reform agenda must be reevaluated from a broader perspective than simply the amount of money being saved. The pathology of making the word reform synonymous with cutting costs is a direct fallout of the Helms-Biden agreement. Several participants were concerned that Helms-Biden reinforced bad behavior by sending a message to the Congress and the world that demands on the United Nations could be achieved by withholding financial payments. With other countries, like Japan, following the US example, the United Nations is starved of more than 50 percent of its budget at the start of each year.

The repayment of US arrears last year was a huge step forward psychologically at the United Nations. The momentum and good will that was accrued should be leveraged by the administration to advance a more substantive agenda for reform. Participants identified five key areas for the administration to focus its efforts:

1. **Helms-Biden:** The administration should focus on finishing the required legislative changes needed to release the last installment of the Helms-Biden arrears repayment, including the lifting of the 25 percent cap on US peacekeeping assessments and delinking the United Nations from conditions set on specialized agencies.

2. **Financial Reform:** First, the US requirement that the United Nations adhere to zero nominal growth continues to hamstring the organization’s ability to respond to urgent crises. One example cited was the inability of the secretary-general to send Brahimi and his team to Afghanistan. Second, the US practice of paying its assessments almost ten months late forces the UN regular budget into financial and budgetary disarray.

3. **Management and Personnel Reform:** Throughout the organization, the quality of mid-level staff is weak. Participants pointed to the need for a stronger emphasis on training and a better incentive structure. At the Secretariat level, the lack of a comprehensive strategy is needed to coordinate mandates, resources, and funding streams.

4. **Structural Reform:** Participants noted the problems caused by the disproportionate resources and staffing between the Secretariat and the mandates it is given by UN committees and commissions. As a result, too much unnecessary work is assigned to the Secretariat, leading to poor quality and high expenses.
5. Reform of Peace and Other Operations: Several participants stressed the need for the United Nations to implement the recommendations in the Brahimi Report. With the recent attention being paid to the scandals involving UN personnel in Bosnia and West Africa, there is an opportunity in Washington to push for long-overdue, needed changes.

In general, the United Nations and its member states need to take a more pragmatic and strategic view for tackling reform. In addition to articulating the agenda, this would involve setting priorities, identifying potential obstacles, and generating the needed political momentum.

Conclusions
Several underlying themes emerged throughout the discussion.

- **First, there was frustration that the United Nations does not consistently act on the lessons identified by internal examination.** Participants stressed that the organization needs more of an openness to change. Internalizing past mistakes and avoiding repetition of them would help improve the organization’s credibility.

- **Second, the United Nations often tends to be blamed for failures for which it is not directly responsible.** The ICC, the World Conference Against Racism, and a number of peace operations were cited as recent examples. Participants warned that the United Nations could find itself in similar situations with Afghanistan and the Global HIV/AIDS Trust Fund.

- **Third, many cautioned that the United Nations should be wary of an American agenda where “everything is defined in terms of terrorism.”** A shared US-UN agenda that isn’t seen as going beyond fighting terrorism would eventually lead to misunderstanding between the actors, and possibly fatigue from the American public.

- **Fourth, the secretary-general can protect the institution to some degree by highlighting issues where the United Nations can affect success.** Continued success with efforts on Resolution 1373 and the ongoing mission in Afghanistan could help partially insulate the United Nations from potential problems.

- **Fifth, time is of the essence.** The United Nations should take full advantage of the secretary-general’s popularity to galvanize the gains made in the US-UN relationship and push through needed reforms.

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This report was prepared by Michael Pan, the rapporteur, following the conference. It contains his interpretation of the proceedings and is not merely a descriptive, chronological account. Participants neither reviewed nor approved the report. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all recommendations, observations, and conclusions.
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