

The Women's Foreign Policy Group Presents  
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Information

*The Future of the United Nations*

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**Shashi Tharoor:** Thank you, Maxine, for that kind introduction.

Although I am conscious that I was not the first choice for today's address – something I will choose to credit solely to my gender -- it is a genuine pleasure to be here, and not least because, in my business, one seldom has the chance to eat or even talk with so many friends, and current and former colleagues, at one sitting.

And my topic – the future of the United Nations -- is one that I am very conscious is of direct and serious concern to many of you, just as it is to me.

So let me start with an irreverence. Perhaps the first question that I should address is: does the UN have a future? Last year, we celebrated the UN's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. At the UN, 60 is the age at which we, the staff, are supposed to contemplate retirement. Should the UN too, be pensioned off?

My firm view is, of course, that it should not -- far from it. Our search must be for a renewed, not a retired, UN. A lot of the criticism of the Organization is indeed ill-founded.

[You do know, and you do care. And so you should,] because sometimes visionaries are right. In 1945, the UN's far-sighted founders, determined to make the second half of the twentieth century different from the much-troubled first, drew up rules to govern international behaviour, and founded institutions in which different nations could cooperate for the common good.

Their idea -- now called "global governance" -- was to create an international architecture that could foster international cooperation, elaborate consensual global norms and establish predictable, universally applicable rules, to the benefit of all -- as an alternative to the military alliances and balance of power politics that wreaked such havoc in the preceding five decades.

The keystone of the arch, so to speak, was the United Nations itself. The UN was seen by those world leaders as the only possible answer to the disastrous experiences of the first half of the century -- fifty years in which the world had suffered two world wars, countless civil wars, brutal dictatorships, mass expulsions of populations, and the horrors of the Holocaust and Hiroshima.

The new United Nations would stand for a world in which people of different nations and cultures would look on each other, not as subjects of fear and suspicion, but as potential partners, able to exchange goods and ideas to their mutual benefit.

And it would provide a means to address what we sometimes like to call 'problems without passports' -- problems that cross all frontiers uninvited (climate change, drug trafficking, terrorism, epidemics, refugee movements and so on) -- and whose solutions also have no passports because no one country or group of countries, however powerful, can tackle them alone.

It is the resolution of these problems that remains at the very core of the UN's activities.

Indeed, today I think it is fair to say that even those countries that once felt insulated from external dangers -- by wealth or strength or distance -- now realize that the safety of people everywhere depends not only on local security forces, but also on guarding against terrorism;

warding off the global spread of pollution, of diseases, of illegal drugs and of weapons of mass destruction; and on promoting human rights, democracy and development.

Today, global forces press in from every conceivable direction. People, goods and ideas cross borders and cover vast distances with ever greater frequency, speed and ease. We are increasingly connected through travel, trade, the Internet; what we watch, what we eat and even the games we play.

In such a world, issues that once seemed very far away are very much in our backyards. Jobs anywhere depend not only on local firms and factories, but on faraway markets for the goods they buy and produce, on licenses and access from foreign governments, on an international environment that allows the free movement of goods and persons, and on international institutions that ensure stability – in short, on the international system constructed in 1945.

And so, in 2006, I would argue that the need for a universal means for global governance, a mechanism for international cooperation -- indeed, let us call it by its name, for a United Nations -- is stronger than ever.

Which leads me to the next question. What kind of United Nations should we build for the future? Part of the answer to that question must lie in the past.

Of course, the UN has never been, and will never be, a perfect body. It has acted unwisely at times, and failed to act at others.

But the United Nations, at its best and its worst, is a mirror of the world: it reflects not just our divisions and disagreements but also our hopes and convictions. As our great second Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, put it, the United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell.

And that it has. We must not forget that the UN has achieved an enormous amount in its 60 years. Most important of all, it prevented the Cold War from turning hot – first, by providing a

roof under which the two superpower adversaries could meet and engage, and second, by mounting peacekeeping operations that ensured that local and regional conflicts were contained and did not ignite a superpower clash that could have sparked off a global conflagration.

Over the years, more than 170 UN-assisted peace settlements have ended regional conflicts. And in the past 15 years, more civil wars have ended through mediation than in the previous two centuries combined, in large part because the UN provided leadership, opportunities for negotiation, strategic coordination and the resources to implement peace agreements.

Over 300 international treaties have been negotiated at the UN, setting an international framework that reduces the prospect for conflict among sovereign States. The UN has built global norms that are universally accepted in areas as diverse as decolonization and disarmament, development and democratization.

And the UN remains second to none in its unquestioned experience, leadership and authority in co-ordinating humanitarian action, from tsunamis to human waves of refugees. When the blue flag flies over a disaster zone, all know that humanity is taking responsibility -- not any one Government -- and that when the UN succeeds, the whole world wins. Our newly-established revolving fund for emergency response to humanitarian disasters reflects and strengthens our ability to make a difference. And these are achievements we can build on.

But since the best crystal ball is often the rear view mirror, I hope you will allow me a personal look into the past as well. For the UN has not just changed enormously in those first 60 years; it has been transformed in the career span of one UN official standing before you. If I had even suggested to my seniors when I joined the Organization 28 years ago that the UN would one day observe and even run elections in sovereign states, conduct intrusive inspections for weapons of mass destruction, impose comprehensive sanctions on the entire import-export trade of a Member State, create a counter-terrorism committee to monitor national actions against terrorists, or set up international criminal tribunals and coerce governments into handing over their citizens to be tried by foreigners under international law, I am sure they would have told me that I simply did not understand what the United Nations was all about. (And indeed, since that

was in the late 1970s, they might well have asked me – “Young man, what have you been smoking?”)

And yet the UN has done every one of those things during the last two decades, and more. The United Nations, in short, has been a highly adaptable institution that has evolved in response to changing times.

Since it has worked in practice, my UN of the future must be firmly anchored in its own experience, even as it sails onward. But we must not rest, and are not resting on our laurels. This is a fascinating time at the UN, because major changes are afoot. As Mahatma Gandhi put it, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” The UN is no exception. To change the world, we must change too.

We need reform, not because the UN has failed, but because it has succeeded enough to be worth investing in. The need for reform became clear as a result of global reactions to the divisions at the UN over the Iraq war. Those divisions led to a crisis of confidence in the international system. But we speak a lot of languages at the UN. And my Chinese friends tell me that in their language, the Chinese character for “crisis” is made up of two other characters – the character for “danger” and the character for “opportunity”. In 2003, the United Nations saw the danger and seized the opportunity.

A series of far reaching proposals were made by the Secretary-General – on the backs of the work of two eminent panels of experts – one that looked at security issues, while the other, composed of economists and experts led by Columbia University’s Professor Jeffrey Sachs, focused on how to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

And at the World Summit last year, some 170 world leaders – the largest ever gathering of heads of State and government in human history – met at the United Nations to discuss those proposals and to agree on a plan to reshape the international architecture for the twenty-first century.

And that they did. It is true that there are several serious and important lacunae in the document the world leaders produced – most notably its failure to redress the international community’s stalemate on disarmament and proliferation issues.

But the stage had been set for much-needed change. Let me give you just a few of the headlines, from, and since, the Summit that point the way to the UN’s future.

First and foremost, the UN would not be itself if it did not seek to serve the mass of suffering humanity – to wipe the tear from the eye of the hungriest little girl in the poorest country. Despite many late night, last-minute fears that they might not agree, the leaders at the Summit reinforced the commitment by both rich and developing States to work together to promote development.

Those from donor and developing nations alike made a strong and unambiguous commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, and donors repeated their Gleneagles promise of an additional \$40 million a year by 2010 to fight poverty.

There was also agreement, by both the richest and the poorest countries, on mechanisms that should make successful and sustainable development more likely – agreement that developing countries will create “management” plans to enable them to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by the end of this year, 2006, and that international trade will be liberalized – thereby reducing the barriers and inequities that prevent poorer states from selling their goods and services in the markets of the North.

Much was made in some circles of the failure of the document to deliver a formal legal definition of terrorism that is acceptable to all. But what few seem to have noticed is that – for the first time ever – we have a clear and unqualified condemnation – by all governments – of terrorism “in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes.”

We now have moral clarity, and legal clarity should follow, if the new-found impetus towards a comprehensive convention against terrorism can be sustained.

Another vitally important development is the acceptance, for the first time, of a collective international responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. As with the development promises, and as we know from the headlines on Darfur, countries still need to put their money where their mouths are – or more accurately, their political will where their political rhetoric has been. But this will, I hope, make it much more difficult for States to hide behind the protective shield of absolute sovereignty while people are slaughtered *en masse*.

The Summit delivered a detailed blueprint for a new Peacebuilding Commission, that is soon to commence operations; it created a fund to support democratization, to which some 40 million dollars has already been pledged by 17 countries – not just from the West: India is a leading donor. And, it set the timer for the creation of much stronger UN machinery, which, in turn, led – on 15 March – to the creation of a smaller and more focused Human Rights Council to replace the over politicized Commission on Human Rights.

Equally important, the doubling of the budget of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – will permit us to make a difference in operational terms where it counts – in the field, not just in the conference room in Geneva.

It is too early to say how effective these changes will be -- the proof of the pudding is in the eating. But we now have a recipe that should work.

Since the Summit, the Secretary-General has made additional proposals about how the UN could be administered, which our Member States are in the process of considering. In the presence of several Ambassadors, who have doubtless been discussing these proposals at some length, and of at least one senior member of our Department of Management's own management team, in Assistant Secretary-General Jan Beagle, I will shy away from too deep a delving into these management reforms. Enough, perhaps, to say that our interest in reform is far from over.

Added together, these changes are profound. If they can be brought to fruition, they will go a long way to setting in place a structure that will allow us to move into the future with renewed confidence. So our next Secretary-General should have, at her disposal, a framework that will allow her (or him) to concentrate on implementation.

I have, I hope, painted a picture of the UN of the future as firmly anchored in its achievements, but eagerly engaged in transforming itself in the light of changing circumstances.

A refurbished UN, built on the strong foundations laid out in 1945, buttressed by the innovations and achievements of the last sixty years, and renovated to take account of the problems that we have uncovered in the course of dealing with the real challenges of the changing world outside.

Realistically, it will probably be a UN that is more sharply focused on areas where it has a proven and undoubted capacity to make a difference. It will, for example, continue to be the first port of call to coordinate the world's response when major humanitarian disasters strike. It is currently the most successful practitioner, and will likely remain the means of choice, to monitor peace treaties. And when territories must be administered while political solutions evolve and the modus operandi for lasting peace are established, the world will continue to turn to the UN since it transcends any one Government's interests but acts in the name of all.

It will not, I imagine, lead military interventions – peacekeeping excepted – although its legislative bodies will undoubtedly remain the primary source of legitimacy for any such interventions. And it will not hunt down terrorists, and others who commit crimes against humanity, although it will sometimes be charged, particularly where national jurisdictions are weak or unclear, with trying them.

And I can see no other entity that could, with the same efficiency and objectivity, provide the means to address the gaps and the cracks in the façade of state sovereignty, through which many of the twenty-first century's problems – from environmental degradation to global epidemics to human rights abuses to international terrorism – would otherwise prosper.



The UN is, and must continue to be, a forum where the rich and powerful can commit their strength and their wealth to the cause of a better world. And it must continue to provide the stage where great and proud nations, big and small, rich and poor, can meet as equals to iron out their differences and find common cause in their shared humanity.

So much for the architecture. But, as the old saying goes, a house is not a home. Something more – something extremely important, although not quite so tangible -- is needed before we can be happy that our Organization is all it can be in the twenty-first century.

The new UN must encapsulate the 21<sup>st</sup> century's equivalent of the spirit that informed its founding.

It must amplify the voices of those who would otherwise not be heard, and serve as a canopy beneath which all can feel secure.

And my UN – our UN – of the future must never lose sight of the problems facing the vast majority of humanity. It must remain true to the “we, the peoples,” in whose name the UN Charter was signed.

The UN of the future must never forget that it is both a child and a source of hopes for a better world – hopes that all human beings share.

To achieve this, those of us who work for the new UN must know when to shout, when to speak ... and when to listen.

And that, I think, is an appropriate note on which to turn the floor over to you.