

"In Larger Freedom": Decision Time at the UN

By Kofi Annan

From Foreign Affairs, May/June 2005

Summary: Dealing with today's threats requires broad, deep, and sustained global cooperation. Thus the states of the world must create a collective security system to prevent terrorism, strengthen nonproliferation, and bring peace to war-torn areas, while also promoting human rights, democracy, and development. And the UN must go through its most radical overhaul yet. Kofi Annan is Secretary-General of the United Nations.

OUR SHARED VULNERABILITY

Ask a New York investment banker who walks past Ground Zero every day on her way to work what today's biggest threat is. Then ask an illiterate 12-year-old orphan in Malawi who lost his parents to AIDS. You will get two very different answers. Invite an Indonesian fisherman mourning the loss of his entire family and the destruction of his village from the recent, devastating tsunami to tell you what he fears most. Then ask a villager in Darfur, stalked by murderous militias and fearful of bombing raids. Their answers, too, are likely to diverge.

Different perceptions of what is a threat are often the biggest obstacles to international cooperation. But I believe that in the twenty-first century they should not be allowed to lead the world's governments to pursue very different priorities or to work at cross-purposes. Today's threats are deeply interconnected, and they feed off of one another. The misery of people caught in unresolved civil conflicts or of populations mired in extreme poverty, for example, may increase their attraction to terrorism. The mass rape of women that occurs too often in today's conflicts makes the spread of HIV and AIDS all the more likely.

In fact, all of us are vulnerable to what we think of as dangers that threaten only other people. Millions more of sub-Saharan Africa's inhabitants would plunge below the poverty line if a nuclear terrorist attack against a financial center in the United States caused a massive downturn in the global economy. By the same token, millions of Americans could quickly become infected if, naturally or through malicious intent, a new disease were to break out in a country with poor health care and be carried across the world by unwitting air travelers before it was identified.

No nation can defend itself against these threats entirely on its own. Dealing with today's challenges -- from ensuring that deadly weapons do not fall into dangerous hands to combating global climate change, from preventing the trafficking of sex slaves by organized criminal gangs to holding war criminals to account before competent courts -- requires broad, deep, and sustained global cooperation. States working together can achieve things that are beyond what even the most powerful state can accomplish by itself.

Those who drew up the charter of the United Nations in 1945 saw these realities very clearly. In the aftermath of World War II, which claimed the lives of 50 million people, they established at the San Francisco conference in 1945 an organization (in the words of the charter) to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war." Their purpose was not to usurp the role of sovereign states but to enable states to serve their peoples better by working together. The UN's founders knew that this enterprise could not be narrowly conceived because security, development, and human rights are inextricably linked. Thus they endowed the new world organization with broad ambitions: to ensure respect for fundamental human rights, to establish conditions under which justice and the rule of law can be maintained, and, as the charter says, "to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom."

When the UN Charter speaks of "larger freedom," it includes the basic political freedoms to which all human beings are entitled. But it also goes beyond them, encompassing what President Franklin Roosevelt called "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear." Both our security and our principles have long demanded that we push forward all these frontiers of freedom, conscious that progress on one depends on and reinforces

progress on the others. In the last 60 years, rapid technological advances, increasing economic interdependence, globalization, and dramatic geopolitical change have made this imperative only more urgent. And since the attacks of September 11, 2001, people everywhere have come to realize this. A new insecurity has entered every mind, regardless of wealth or status. More clearly than ever before, we understand that our safety, our prosperity -- indeed, our freedom -- is indivisible.

A NEW SAN FRANCISCO MOMENT

Yet precisely when these challenges have become so stark, and when collective action has become so plainly required, we see deep discord among states. Such dissonance discredits our global institutions. It allows the gap between the haves and the have-nots, the strong and the weak, to grow. It sows the seeds of a backlash against the very principles that the UN was set up to advance. And by inviting states to pursue their own solutions, it calls into question some of the fundamental principles that have, however imperfectly, buttressed the international order since 1945.

Future generations will not forgive us if we continue down this path. We cannot just muddle along and make do with incremental responses in an era when organized crime syndicates seek to smuggle both sex slaves and nuclear materials across borders; when whole societies are being laid waste by AIDS; when rapid advances in biotechnology make it all too feasible to create "designer bugs" immune to current vaccines; and when terrorists, whose ambitions are very plain, find ready recruits among young men in societies with little hope, even less justice, and narrowly sectarian schools. It is urgent that our world unite to master today's threats and not allow them to divide us and thus master us.

In recent months, I have received two wide-ranging reviews of our global challenges: one from the 16-member High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, which I had asked to make proposals to strengthen our collective security system; the other from 250 experts who undertook the UN Millennium Project and devised a plan to cut global poverty in half within the next ten years. Both reports are remarkable as much for their hardheaded realism as for their bold vision. Having carefully studied them, and extensively consulted UN member states, I have just placed before the world's governments my own blueprint for a new era of global cooperation and collective action.

My report, entitled "In Larger Freedom," calls on states to use the summit of world leaders that will be held at UN headquarters in September to strengthen our collective security, lay down a truly global strategy for development, advance the cause of human rights and democracy in all nations, and put in place new mechanisms to ensure that these commitments are translated into action. Accountability -- of states to their citizens, of states to one another, of international institutions to their members, and of this present generation to future ones -- is essential for our success. With that in mind, the UN must undergo the most sweeping overhaul of its 60-year history. World leaders must recapture the spirit of San Francisco and forge a new world compact to advance the cause of larger freedom.

FREEDOM FROM FEAR

The starting point for a new consensus should be a broad view of today's threats. These dangers include not just international wars but also civil violence, organized crime, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction. They also include poverty, infectious disease, and environmental degradation, since these ills can also have catastrophic consequences and wreak tremendous damage. All of these can undermine states as the basic units of the international system.

All states -- strong and weak, rich and poor -- share an interest in having a collective security system that commits them to act cooperatively against a broad array of threats. The basis of such a system must be a new commitment to preventing latent threats from becoming imminent and imminent threats from becoming actual, as well as an agreement on when and how force should be used if preventive strategies fail.

Action is required on many fronts, but three of them stand out as particularly urgent. First, we must ensure that catastrophic terrorism never becomes a reality. In that cause, we must make use of the unique normative strength, global reach, and convening power of the UN. To start, a comprehensive convention against terrorism should be developed. The UN has been central in helping states negotiate and adopt 12 international antiterrorism conventions, but a comprehensive convention outlawing terrorism in all its forms has so far eluded us because of debates on "state terrorism" and the right to resist occupation. It is time to put these debates aside. The use of force by states is already thoroughly regulated under international law. And the right to resist occupation must be understood in its true meaning: it cannot include the right

deliberately to kill or maim civilians. World leaders should unite behind a definition of terrorism that makes clear beyond any question that the targeting of civilians or noncombatants is never acceptable. And they must work to strengthen the capacity of states to meet the binding antiterrorism obligations imposed on them by the Security Council.

Equally urgent is the need to breathe new life into our multilateral frameworks for the management of biological, chemical, and especially nuclear weapons; we must prevent the proliferation of these weapons and keep them out of the most dangerous hands. For 35 years, the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), signed by all but three nations in the world, has greatly reduced the danger of nuclear weapons' being used by placing strict but voluntarily accepted limits on their possession. But recently, for the first time, a party (North Korea) has withdrawn from the treaty, and strains on its verification and enforcement measures have led to a crisis of confidence.

To prevent a cascade of proliferation, we must find ways to mitigate the tensions caused by the fact that technology required for civilian uses of nuclear power can also be used to develop nuclear weapons. The verification role of the International Atomic Energy Agency should be strengthened through universal acceptance of the Model Additional Protocol (which toughens the NPT's reporting requirements and inspection regime), and incentives should be developed to help states forgo the development of sensitive fuel-cycle activities while guaranteeing them the fuel they need for peaceful purposes. We should also welcome other initiatives, such as Security Council Resolution 1540, which aims to prevent nonstate actors from gaining access to hazardous weapons, technology, and materials, and the voluntary Proliferation Security Initiative, through which an increasing number of states are cooperating to prevent illicit trafficking in nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and materials.

A third priority is to make sure that we succeed when we take on the task of building lasting peace in war-torn lands. So far, our success in winning the peace has been decidedly mixed. Half of all civil wars that appear to have been resolved by peace agreements tragically slide back into conflict within five years. This slip can have catastrophic consequences: millions perished, for example, in Angola and Rwanda in the mid-1990s after peace agreements collapsed in both countries. Although over the last decade the international community has come to a much deeper appreciation of what it takes to win the peace, it still lacks a strategic focus for its work. I therefore propose the creation of a new intergovernmental organ in the UN: a Peacebuilding Commission. The commission would be a forum in which representatives from donor countries, troop contributors, and the country being helped would sit together with leaders from other member states, international financial institutions, and regional organizations to agree on strategy, provide policy guidance, mobilize resources, and coordinate the efforts of all involved.

When prevention fails, and all other means have been exhausted, we must be able to rely on the use of force. However, we need to find common ground on when and how. Article 51 of the UN Charter preserves the right of all states to act in self-defense against an armed attack. Most lawyers recognize that the provision includes the right to take pre-emptive action against an imminent threat; it needs no reinterpretation or rewriting. Yet today we also face dangers that are not imminent but that could materialize with little or no warning and might culminate in nightmare scenarios if left unaddressed. The Security Council is fully empowered by the UN Charter to deal with such threats, and it must be ready to do so.

We must also remember that state sovereignty carries responsibilities as well as rights, including the responsibility to protect citizens from genocide or other mass atrocities. When states fail to live up to this responsibility, it passes to the international community, which, if necessary, should stand ready to take enforcement action authorized by the Security Council.

The decision to use force is never easy. To help forge consensus over when and how resort to force is appropriate, the Security Council should consider the seriousness of the threat, whether the proposed action addresses the threat, the proportionality of that proposed action, whether force is being contemplated as a last resort, and whether the benefits of using force would outweigh the costs of not using it. Balancing such considerations will not produce made-to-measure answers but should help produce decisions that are grounded in principle and therefore command broad respect.

LIVING IN DIGNITY

Accepting our solemn responsibility to protect civilians against massive violations of human rights is part of a larger need: to take human rights and the rule of law seriously in the conduct of international affairs. We need long-term, sustained engagement to integrate human rights and the rule of law into all the work of the

UN. This commitment is as critical to conflict prevention as it is to poverty reduction, particularly in states struggling to shed a legacy of violence.

The UN, as the vehicle through which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and two international human rights covenants have been promulgated, has made an enormous contribution to human rights. But the international machinery in place today is not sufficient to ensure that those rights are upheld in practice. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights operates on a shoestring budget, with insufficient capacity to monitor the field. The high commissioner's office needs more support, both political and financial. The Security Council -- and in time, I hope, the proposed Peacebuilding Commission -- should involve the high commissioner much more actively in its deliberations.

The Commission on Human Rights has been discredited in the eyes of many. Too often states seek membership to insulate themselves from criticism or to criticize others, rather than to assist in the body's true task, which is to monitor and encourage the compliance of all states with their human rights obligations. The time has come for real reform. The commission should be transformed into a new Human Rights Council. The members of this council should be elected directly by the General Assembly and pledge to abide by the highest human rights standards.

No human rights agenda can ignore the right of all people to govern themselves through democratic institutions. The principles of democracy are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, ever since it was adopted in 1948, has inspired constitutions in every corner of the globe. Democracy is more widely accepted and practiced today than ever before. By setting norms and leading efforts to end colonialism and ensure self-determination, the UN has helped nations freely choose their destiny. The UN has also given concrete support for elections in more and more countries: in the last year alone, it has done so in more than 20 areas and countries, including Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq, and Burundi. Since democracy is about far more than elections, the organization's work to improve governance throughout the developing world and to rebuild the rule of law and state institutions in war-torn countries is also of vital importance. Member states of the UN should now build on this record, as President George W. Bush suggested to the UN General Assembly in September 2004, by supporting a fund to help countries establish or strengthen democracy.

Of course, at the UN, democratic states sometimes have to work with nondemocratic ones. But today's threats do not stop neatly at the borders of democratic states, and just as no democratic nation restricts its bilateral relations to democracies, no multilateral organization designed to achieve global objectives can restrict its membership to them. I look forward to the day when every member state of the General Assembly is democratically governed. The UN's universal membership is a precious asset in advancing that goal. The very fact that nondemocratic states often sign on to the UN's agenda opens an avenue through which other states, as well as civil society around the world, can press them to align their behavior with their commitments.

FREEDOM FROM WANT

Support for human rights and democracy must go hand in hand with serious action to promote development. A world in which every year 11 million children die before their fifth birthday, almost all from preventable causes, and 3 million people of all ages die of AIDS is not a world of larger freedom. It is a world that desperately needs a practical strategy to implement the Millennium Declaration on which all states solemnly agreed five years ago. The eight Millennium Development Goals that are to be achieved by 2015 include halving the proportion of people in the world who live in extreme poverty and hunger, ensuring that all children receive primary education, and turning the tide against HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other major diseases.

The urgency of taking more effective action to achieve these goals can hardly be overstated. Although the deadline is still a decade away, we risk missing it if we do not drastically accelerate and scale up our action this year. Development gains cannot be achieved overnight. It takes time to train teachers, nurses, and engineers; to build roads, schools, and hospitals; and to grow the small and large businesses that create jobs and generate income for the poor.

The UN summit in September must be the time when all nations sign up not just for a declaration but also for a detailed plan of attack on deadly poverty by which all can be judged. That summit will be a moment for deeds rather than words -- a moment to implement the commitments that have been made and to move from the realm of aspirations to that of operations.

At the core of this plan must be the global partnership between rich and poor countries, the terms of which were set out three years ago at the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey, Mexico. That historic compact was firmly grounded in the principles of mutual responsibility and mutual accountability. It reaffirmed the responsibility of each country for its own development and elicited concrete commitments from wealthy nations to support poorer ones.

In September, all developing countries should undertake to put forward, by 2006, practical national strategies to meet the Millennium Goals. Each country should map the key dimensions and underlying causes of extreme poverty, use that map to assess its needs and identify necessary public investments, and convert that assessment into a ten-year framework for action, elaborating three-to-five-year poverty-reduction strategies for the meantime.

Donors must also ensure that developing countries that put such strategies in place really do get the support they need, in the form of market access, debt relief, and official development assistance (ODA). For too long, ODA has been inadequate, unpredictable, and driven by supply rather than demand. Although such aid has been increasing since the Monterrey summit, already with noticeable results, many donors still give far less than the target of 0.7 percent of gross national income. All of them should now draw up their own ten-year strategies to meet the 0.7 percent target by 2015 and ensure that they reach 0.5 percent by 2009.

We need action on other fronts, too. On global climate change, for example, the time has come to agree on an international framework that draws in all major emitters of greenhouse gases in a common effort to combat global warming beyond the year 2012, when the Kyoto Protocol is due to expire. We need both a commitment to a new regulatory framework and far more innovative use of new technologies and market mechanisms in carbon trading. We must also learn the lesson of December's devastating tsunami, by putting in place a worldwide capability to give early warning of all natural hazards -- not just tsunamis and storms, but floods, droughts, landslides, heat waves, and volcanic eruptions.

A RENEWED UN

If the UN is to be a vehicle through which states can meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, it needs major reforms to strengthen its relevance, effectiveness, and accountability. In September, decisions should be reached to make the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council more strategic in their work. Just as we contemplate creating new institutions such as a Peacebuilding Commission, we should abolish those that are no longer needed, such as the Trusteeship Council.

No reform of the UN would be complete, however, without Security Council reform. The council's present makeup reflects the world of 1945, not that of the twenty-first century. It must be reformed to include states that contribute most to the organization, financially, militarily, and diplomatically, and to represent broadly the current membership of the UN. Two models for expanding the council from 15 to 24 members are now on the table: one creates six new permanent seats and three new nonpermanent ones; the other creates nine new nonpermanent seats. Neither model expands the veto power currently enjoyed by the five permanent members. I believe the time has come to tackle this issue head on. Member states should make up their minds and reach a decision before the September summit.

Equally important is reform of the UN Secretariat and the wider network of agencies, funds, and programs that make up the UN system. Since 1997, there has been a quiet revolution at the UN, rendering the system more coherent and efficient. But I am deeply conscious that more needs to be done to make the organization more transparent and accountable, not just to member states, but to the public on whose confidence it relies and whose interests it ultimately must serve. Recent failures have only underlined this imperative.

I am already taking a series of measures to make the UN Secretariat's procedures and management more open to scrutiny. But if reform is to be truly successful, the secretary-general, as chief administrative officer of the organization, must be empowered to manage it with autonomy and flexibility, so that he or she can drive through the necessary changes. The secretary-general must be able to align the organization's work program behind the kind of agenda I have outlined, once it is endorsed by member states, and not be hamstrung by old mandates and a fragmented decision-making structure that jeopardize setting a central strategic direction. When member states grant the post this autonomy and flexibility, they will have both the right and the responsibility to demand even greater transparency and accountability.

DECISION TIME

In calling on member states to make the most far-reaching reform in the organization's history and to come together on a range of issues where collective action is required, I do not claim that success through multilateral means is guaranteed. But I can almost guarantee that unilateral approaches will, over time, fail. I believe states have no reasonable alternative to working together, even if collaboration means taking the priorities of your partners seriously to ensure that they will take seriously your own in return -- even if, as President Harry Truman said in San Francisco 60 years ago, "We all have to recognize, no matter how great our strength, that we must deny ourselves the license to do always as we please."

The urgency of global cooperation is now more apparent than ever. A world warned of its vulnerability cannot stand divided while old problems continue to claim the lives of millions and new problems threaten to do the same. A world of interdependence cannot be safe or just unless people everywhere are freed from want and fear and are able to live in dignity. Today, as never before, the rights of the poor are as fundamental as those of the rich, and a broad understanding of them is as important to the security of the developed world as it is to that of the developing world.

Ralph Bunche, a great American and the first UN official to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, once said that the UN exists "not merely to preserve the peace but also to make change -- even radical change -- possible without violent upheaval. The UN has no vested interest in the status quo." Today, these words take on new significance. The UN's mission of peace must bring closer the day when all states exercise their sovereignty responsibly, deal with internal dangers before these threaten their citizens and those of other states, enable and empower their citizens to choose the kind of lives they would like to live, and act with other states to meet global threats and challenges. In short, the UN must steer all of the world's peoples toward "better standards of life in larger freedom." The UN summit in September is the chance for all of us to set out on that path.

www.foreignaffairs.org is copyright 2002--2005 by the Council on Foreign Relations. All rights reserved.