

by Brett D. Schaefer

On September 23, President Barack Obama will give his first address to the United Nations General Assembly. Recent statements by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Susan Rice may offer several clues as to the content of the President's speech. Both laid out a wide-ranging agenda that, together, would have the U.S. seeking U.N. action on nuclear proliferation and disarmament, global warming, the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, development, women's rights, and a number of other issues.

While this list may be broad, it contains very few "new" policies: previous Administrations have addressed these issues or themes repeatedly at the U.N. What is different, however, is the tone: Both speeches blamed the previous Administration for tense relations between the U.S. and the U.N. while glossing over, downplaying, or ignoring the U.N.'s many problems. The U.S. does itself and the U.N. no favors with this strategy. Giving the U.N. more responsibilities without pressing for the reforms necessary for them to be successful will only reaffirm the U.N.'s reputation for irrelevance and ineffectiveness.

A Misdirected Reform Agenda

There is no doubt that, historically, the relationship between the United States and the United Nations has been strained. Yet this is to be expected: The U.N. is a profoundly political body with 192 member nations seeking to advance their various, often competing, interests. Both Ambassador Rice and Secretary Clinton, however, assign primary fault for the strained relationship not to the normal stresses of competing agendas but to American policies. Rice stated:

[W]e've seen the costs of disengaging. We have paid the price of stiff-arming the U.N. and spurning our international partners. The United States will lead in the 21st century--not with hubris, not by hectoring, but through patient diplomacy and a steadfast resolve to strengthen our common security by investing in our common humanity.

Rice pledged to "dramatically" revamp America's role at the U.N. by working more closely with other nations on key issues and setting a tone of "decency and mutual respect rather than condescension and contempt."

Based on Rice's comment that "others will likely shoulder a greater share of the global burden if the U.S. leads by example, acknowledges mistakes, corrects course when necessary, forges strategies in partnership and treats others with respect," it is hard not to conclude that the Obama Administration sees the past U.S. policies as the primarily problem. Indeed, the Administration has focused not on reforming the U.N. but on reforming U.S. policy at the U.N.,

including:

- * Adopting the Millennium Development Goals as U.S. policy, despite their many flaws as a development strategy;
- * Joining the Human Rights Council, which the Bush Administration had shunned because it was gravely flawed, anti-Israel, and included countries that use their positions to blunt action to promote human rights (such as China, Cuba, and Saudi Arabia);
- * Rescinding the Mexico City policy prohibiting U.S. funding of abortions abroad, supporting resolutions that use the term "reproductive health" as a code for support for abortion and restoring U.S. contributions to the U.N. Population Fund;
- * Supporting references to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in U.N. resolutions despite the fact that the U.S. has refused to join the court over concerns about its vulnerability to politicization and the recent announcement by the ICC prosecutor that he could launch investigations of U.S. troops for actions in Afghanistan; and
- * Paying nearly a billion dollars in U.S. arrears to the U.N. without demanding any reforms in exchange, despite extensive evidence of fraud and corruption in U.N. peacekeeping procurement and lack of punishment for peacekeepers involved in sexual abuse or other misconduct.

In contrast, the Administration's agenda for U.N. reform is extremely general or completely absent. For example, Secretary Clinton did not mention U.N. reform once in her speech. Rice stated:

It's not enough that costs be contained and funds spent without corruption; each dollar must serve its intended purpose. ... Our priorities are greater transparency and accountability, stronger ethics and oversight mechanisms, and buttressing Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's initiatives to overhaul the U.N.'s procurement and human resources practices.

Ambassador Rice knows that most of these reforms have been stalled at the U.N. due to resistance by most member states. Other implemented reforms, like the U.N. Ethics Office, have been hamstrung and ignored by disparate parts of the U.N. Worse, reforms that showed promise—such as the Mandate Review and the Procurement Task Force—were terminated or strangled.

Unless the U.S. pushes hard—including being willing to withhold U.S. contributions based on evidence from previous reform efforts—U.N. reform will continue to fall short. Such shortcomings are a concern because the Administration clearly seeks U.N. involvement in more issues central to U.S. interests. Yet the organization's ability to address these issues is compromised by the lack of reform.

If the United States is to benefit from the U.N., it must lead the reform effort. Unfortunately, the U.S. is instead focused on using its political capital to tilt at multilateral windmills like urging the

U.N. to address global warming and nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament--issues that require multilateral action but have historically foundered at the U.N.

American Leadership Needed

Secretary Clinton stated, "We, in my view, ignore [the United Nations] and walk away from it at our peril." Working with or through the U.N. can advance U.S. interests in certain circumstances, but Americans ignore the failings of the U.N. at their peril.

If the U.S. is to protect its interests, it must continue--as Kim R. Holmes argues in *ConUNdrum*, a new book on the U.N.-to take the lead in addressing the many problems plaguing the U.N. system and understand when to go to the U.N. and, even more critically, when not to. As long as the Obama Administration has its focus inverted, U.S. interests at the U.N. and elsewhere will suffer.

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