

**UN Reform: What matters most?  
Oh, and Just Say No to John Bolton**

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It would not be extreme to say that this is a defining moment for the relationship between the United States and the United Nations. A good part of the US appears to be caught up in a wave of populist and provincial sentiment that reflects not so much isolationism as confusion over **what roles we want for the US and for the UN in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. Our foreign policy should express our intentions, but if we are divided and confused, it is not surprising that we find it hard to speak and act coherently on the international stage.

The United Nations is many things to many people, but one thing it certainly is not is a world government. It is, at best, an overly ambitious association, with some active and some deadbeat members. The people who work in the committees and working groups and agencies and commissions that make up the UN system may vary widely in their management discipline, but they all share a passionate commitment to the work of improving people's lives. They are not dedicating themselves to pocketing a profit, and they are not spending their time idly awaiting their next holiday. If you want to get a feel for the work that is being done by thousands of dedicated internationals, go to [www.un.org](http://www.un.org) and click through some of the web pages describing the work of the UN.

As we head into summer vacations, most Americans keep slightly less track of the news, though of course breaking news headlines are always of interest. If you'd like a better feel for what is actually happening around the world, go to the UN news center at <http://www.un.org/News/>. You can register for free email headlines and, I guarantee, a few days of reading those will give you a new appreciation for the complexities and breathtaking cruelties of life past our shorelines.

**Reform will happen at the UN** whether we participate in a meaningful way or not – there is a momentum to the process now underway that cannot – and should not – be stopped. But which reforms matter most and which are most likely to happen? The reform agenda proposed for decision by Heads of State and Government leading up to the Summit meeting this September is ambitious. The report **“in larger freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All”** grew out of the Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change that was commissioned in 2003 by the Secretary-General, and it lays out a series of important recommendations for administrative, management, substantive and policy changes. Many if not most of these changes will be implemented no matter what the US says or does because they are obvious, they are long overdue and there is a strong constituency *within the UN* to see them happen now.

There are a few reforms that interested UN watchers say are likely to happen, though since some require ratification by the member states they will take time to implement. Most contentious is **Security Council expansion** (most observers predict the US will agree to add Japan but not Germany as a permanent member). Certainly less contentious

are eliminating the “enemy combatants” references in the UN Charter, and re-evaluating and possibly eliminating the international trusteeship council. The many reforms designed to **increase accountability** within the UN system are not going to be opposed by the members, and indeed, if you want to get a look at how transparently the UN is now managing the financial resources associated with the tsunami relief effort (and other relief efforts underway) go to [www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int) – you will find an amazing system in place to coordinate the logistics of relief efforts in an efficient and transparent way. The system was set up *ProBono* by PriceWaterHouseCoopers after the tsunami hit and it represents the way forward for the UN and all the other international agencies working around the globe.

Another big issue for UN watchers is **reform of the Human Rights Commission** and the establishment of an advisory council on human rights. By opening membership on the Commission to all member states (rather than establishing criteria for a seat on the Commission to avoid the current problem of egregious human rights violators passing judgment on other states), and establishing a separate advisory council to be comprised of independent experts to be appointed for 3 year terms, the reforms will pave the way for the Commission to morph into an independent Human Rights Council which could be relied upon for critical, fact-based assessments of country-specific situations.

Reforming the United Nations is a big challenge, of course, and to hear some folks talk about it, a nearly impossible one. But is it really the case that the UN is like a cancer patient who needs chemotherapy that will either kill him or give him a few more years? That’s how John Bolton was described to me the other day: the shot of chemo that will either bring the organization to its knees or revive it, weakened but still standing. Is either of those options our best play here? Bolton has been described as a rogue negotiator, one who can’t be trusted, and as someone who lacks the persuasive skills so necessary to diplomatic work. Why should we handicap our own efforts to manage the change process at the UN by sending as our representative someone who alienates others? The American people – and the millions who look to us to lead the world – deserve better.

*-Lydia Lazar*