Columbia University

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Karl P. Sauvant, Columbia University
Joachim Mueller

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The United Nations year 2004/2005: relevance challenged - and confirmed
by

Joachim Müller and Karl P. Sauvant[1]

The United Nations (UN) year 2004/2005 (14 September 2004-13 September 2005) of the 59th session of the General Assembly stood under the sign of the preparation for the 2005 World Summit, 14-16 September 2005. The process leading to the Summit was triggered by challenges to the relevance of the UN in today’s world. It ended with a reconfirmation that, if anything, the UN is needed more than ever. However, compared to the high expectations for fundamental reform, it left many disappointed.

On 23 September 2003, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, observed in a speech to the General Assembly that the Organization was at a “fork in the road”: marginalization or revitalization.

Marginalization was a spectre. In particular, the Iraq war -- at that time the world’s largest conflict and still the greatest challenge in post-conflict management -- had taken place that year without the blessing of the Security Council, leading many to blame the UN for either not sanctioning the war or for not preventing it. In its wake, abuses in the oil-for-food programme were brought to light in 2005. That programme had been established by the Security Council, supervised by its Iraq Sanctions Committee and administered by the UN Secretariat. It accomplished its principal objective of providing Iraqis with a minimum of nutrition and health; it was also successful in maintaining support for the sanction regime that ultimately succeeded in keeping weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of Iraq. However, the programme suffered -- as the reports[2] of a committee headed by Paul Volcker documented -- from inefficiencies, waste and allegations of corruption; this impaired the credibility of the UN. At the same time, the threat of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction loomed large, atrocities took place in Darfur (Sudan), terrorist acts occurred in various parts of the world, and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) lagged seriously behind in many countries. This list of challenges to the world community is not exhaustive.

Many of these developments -- and in spite of a number of positive developments, such as the UN-coordinated response to the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 -- raised questions about the relevance of the UN in today’s world,
and especially the effectiveness of its intergovernmental machinery and the Secretariat in implementing decisions of the Organization.

The result was a broad-based soul-searching on the relevance of the UN and ways to increase it. It took place at two levels: objectives and institutions.

At the level of objectives -- and greatly simplifying -- developed countries are looking at the UN especially as an instrument to safeguard security. Peace and security have always been at the heart of the UN. But the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, and on subsequent occasions, have given the security concern special saliency. Particularly important here are the fight against terrorism, measures to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, in particular measures to prevent such weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists; and efforts to strengthen and promote peacekeeping. In fact, tire 58th General Assembly was dominated to a certain extent by these issues, as discussed in ARUNA 2003/2004. More broadly, such issues as peacebuilding, reconstruction and electoral assistance also fall into this category. In addition, developed countries also pay special attention to human rights and the prevention of genocide -- objectives that are rooted in the tradition of liberal democracies. The issue of genocide, in particular, has given rise to the concept of humanitarian intervention and, more specifically, the notion of a “responsibility to Protect”.

The question of the role of the UN in providing collective security and, specifically, the manner in which the Iraq war came about, led the Secretary-General to establish (in November 2003) the “High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change” facing the world community, to examine these and to propose options as to how the UN could respond to them. It was chaired by Anand Panyarachun, former Prime Minister of Thailand. The Panel’s report was submitted to the Secretary-General in December 2004. It contained a wide-ranging review of today’s global threats and a series of recommendations to address them and to strengthen the UN system, especially in the security field.

For developing countries, peace and security (and related issues) are of course also important. But they look to the UN especially as an instrument to promote development, their paramount concern. (For developed countries, the promotion of development is also an important objective, but it is not a paramount one for them.) This concern is reflected in the UN development agenda, a compact arising from internationally agreed development goals resulting from a series of global UN conferences in the economic and social fields. The most prominent expression of this compact was the Millennium Declaration adopted by the world’s leaders at the 2000 Millennium Summit. The Declaration sets out the Millennium Development Goals for progress to be achieved by 2015 towards eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving
maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and promoting a global partnership for development.

The MDGs provided the framework for a good part of the Organization’s intergovernmental and secretarial activities. In May 2004, then, the General Assembly decided to convene a high-level plenary meeting to undertake a comprehensive review of the progress made in the fulfilment of the commitments contained in the Millennium Declaration. To help prepare that review, the Millennium Project,[6] headed by Jeffrey D. Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and Special Advisor to the Secretary-General of the UN, accelerated its work of analyzing the MDGs and proposing actions that could move their implementation forward. The resulting report[7](which benefited from the reports often task forces-see box below) was submitted to the Secretary-General in January 2005. It contained a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the problematique and a number of recommendations whose implementation would help to achieve the MDGs. In addition, a range of review conferences, events organized in the context of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and meetings of functional commissions made an input into the MDG process.

Box: The Task Forces of the Millennium Project

Task Force 1 on poverty and economic development
Coordinators: Mari E. Pengestu and Jeffrey D. Sachs

Task Force 2 on hunger
Coordinators: Pedro Sanchez and M.S. Swaminathan

Task Force 3 on education and gender equality
Coordinators: Nancy Birdsall, Anina J. Ibrahim and Geeta Rao Gupta

Task Force 4 on child health and maternal health
Coordinators: Mushtaque Chowdury and Alan Rosenfield

Task Force 5 on HIV/AIDS, Malaria, TB, other major diseases, and access to essential medicine

Coordinators: Agnes Bingawaho, Jaap Broekmans, Paula Munderi, Josh Ruxin, Burton Singer, and Awash Teklehaimanot

Task Force 6 on environmental sustainability

Coordinators: Yolanda Kakabadse Navarro, Jeff McNeely and Don J. Melnick

Task Force 7 on water and sanitation

Coordinators: Roberto Lenton and Albert Wright

Task Force 8 on improving the lives of slum dwellers

Coordinators: Pedro Garau and Elliott D. Sclar

Task Force 9 on open, rule-based trading systems

Coordinators: Patrick Messerlin and Ernesto Zedillo

Task Force 10 on science, technology and innovation

Coordinators: Calestous Juma and Ir Lee Yee-Cheong

Source: www.unmillenniumproject.org/reports
At the level of institutions, the soul-searching focused on the adequacy and functioning of the UN’s intergovernmental machinery and the Secretariat, including their legitimacy and effectiveness. Some of it had its origin in the question of the representativeness of the Security Council (which had changed only once since the creation of the Organization), the standing and composition of the Commission on Human Rights, and the workings of ECOSOC. There was also the question of whether the changing objectives of the UN may require new organizational arrangements, e.g. in the area of peacebuilding. And there was the question of how to increase the effectiveness of the Secretariat, including by vesting more executive power in the Secretary-General. All this added up to the recognition that a new round of institutional reform was needed.[8]

Thus, the year 2005 saw the confluence and culmination of various strands of thinking and work around the themes of development, security and reform, with human rights increasingly receiving special attention. The discussions -- which dominated the UN year 2004/2005 -- were furthermore helped by the fact that these themes are closely interlinked and therefore need to be addressed together (which was also recognized by the High-level Panel): development requires peace and security; peace and security is founded on the alleviation of poverty and inequalities; and both objectives require respect for human rights. And all objectives need legitimate and effective institutions and instruments to promote them. This, in turn, gave rise to the possibility of a “grand bargain” between developed and developing countries to give a push to development, increase security and promote human rights, backed up by a revitalized UN. Elements of such a bargain were outlined in the Secretary-General’s report “In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all”[9] (issued in March 2005) which, in turn, served as the basis for the subsequent negotiations.

The opportunity to strike such a bargain would be the high-level meeting called for by the General Assembly in 2004 to review the progress made in the implementation of the Millennium Declaration—but this meeting now acquired a more comprehensive purpose and was elevated to a World Summit of Heads of State and Government. The opportunity looked promising as there was something in it for all major players, allowing them to give up opposition to some proposals in exchange for agreement on proposals that are particularly important for them.

The 2005 World Summit: High-Level Plenary Meeting of the 60th Session of the General Assembly took place on 14-16 September 2005 at UN Headquarters in New York, attended by 151 world leaders.[10] The Summit adopted the Outcome Document,[11] analyzed in detail in the Introduction below by Rubens Ricupero, distinguished expert and guest author of ARUNA. In it, the leaders agreed, among other things, on an international responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (which may have far-
reaching implications as this potentially allows the international community to get involved in what was hitherto regarded as the internal affairs of states); the creation of a Human Rights Council to replace the Commission on Human Rights (although its details remain to be determined); the creation of a Peacebuilding Commission to help countries in their transition from war to peace; a strong and unambiguous commitment to achieve the MDGs by 2015;[12] the reform of the ECOSOC; and management reform (but without giving the Secretary-General strong executive power). The Summit failed, however, to reach agreement on such important issues as the enlargement of the Security Council; nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament; criteria for the use of force; and a definition of terrorism (although terrorism was strongly condemned). Some of these issues had previously been considered unsuccessfully in various UN bodies, and they remain on the agenda.

Has the outcome of the Summit resulted in a revitalization or marginalization of the United Nations? In the event, and measured against the ambitious and wide-ranging proposals that were before them, the members of the United Nations did not arrive at a grand bargain (as analyzed by Rubens Ricupero in the Introduction). (It is the member states that need to agree, i.e. the Secretary-General typically cannot act on his own.) While various priority objectives were reaffirmed, their implementation was not backed up by a comprehensive new architecture that could improve future cooperation within the international Community.

Rather, the result was a scaled down bargain. However, measured against what had been achieved on earlier occasions, the outcome is respectable and contains important accomplishments. In fact, with the establishment of the Human Rights Council, the UN acquires a third pillar (in addition to development and peace and security). The compromise reached was another step in the tortuous process of adjusting international governance in the face of global challenges. Moreover, the unresolved issues will not go away: they will need to be addressed on future occasions. For those for which agreement has been reached, implementation now is key.

This result may be disappointing, but it is not surprising, as the aims were high. The logic and promise of a grand bargain was based on the need to address pent-up challenges in the areas of development, peace and security, human rights and reform as a package. But the task of reconciling the different priorities and national interests of 191 member countries -- the basic challenge of any intergovernmental organization -- in one felt swoop simply proved elusive. To do that would perhaps have required the extraordinary circumstances of a catalytic crisis and/or a group of visionary leaders who would be prepared to put global priorities ahead of national interests. In their absence, a step-by-step approach -- however cumbersome and fitful -- remains the only realistic approach.
Something else is important: there is an emerging consensus that, in today’s world, peace and security, development and human rights are inseparable. Traditionally, peace and security were defined in reference to external events -- war and inter-state conflict. In the past decade, there has been a shift in emphasis from “peace” to “security” in the UN’s discussions. Moreover, “security” has acquired additional dimensions. One has already been discussed, namely the recognition that peace, security and development are inseparable. Another is that groups within states may, in certain circumstances, need to be protected through humanitarian international intervention if local authorities are not capable to provide such protection. With the acceptance of the “responsibility-to-protect” principle, certain matters of internal security have now become an international concern. This poses a challenge to an international system based on sovereign states. This challenge is taken further with the emergence of terrorism, as terrorism transcends the established notions of conflicts that are prescribed by territories and introduces a dimension of security that is non-territorial in nature. This widening of the security concept reflects the interdependence of a globalizing world, and it creates new challenges for the international community.

Hence, the very fact that all governments recognize that the big challenges of our time require a global approach (even if priorities may differ among countries) and that they seek to find ways and means to address them collectively amounts to a reconfirmation of the relevance of the United Nations -- as it continues to evolve in response to changing realities, competing priorities and shifting pressures.

[1] The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the institutions with which the authors are affiliated. We would like to express our gratitude for helpful suggestions and feedback by Henk-Jan Brinkman, Nikolai Zaitsev, Silvana F. da Silva, Harris Gleckman, Tim Wall and Joerg Weber.


[6] The project was established by the Secretary-General in 2002.


[10] Technically, the Summit took place during the 60th Session of the General Assembly, i.e. during the 2005-2006 UN year; however, since it represents the culmination of work of the 59th session, it is covered in this volume. The 59th session of the General Assembly approved, on its last day, the draft outcome document and referred it to the Summit that kicked off the Assembly’s 60th session.


[12] This includes a commitment by all developing countries to adopt, by 2006, national plans for achieving the MDGs. In the run-up to the Summit, the EU15 committed themselves to reach the 0.7% target, the Group of 8 adopted far-reaching debt proposals and the Group of 6 (led by Brazil and France) agreed on innovative sources of finance -- all commitments confirmed at the Summit.