

## Deck Chairs on the Titanic

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It is often said incorrectly that the United Nations Charter, framed in San Francisco during the final year of the Second World War, was designed for the world of 1945. It was actually designed for the world of the 1930s. The paramount question on the minds of the Charter's framers, not unreasonably, was "how do we prevent another Adolph Hitler?" The idea at the core of their Charter was that the wartime allies - who became the Security Council's five permanent members - would act in concert to repel all such future aggressions.

But consider the great issues facing the human community six long decades later. Environmental degradation. The AIDS pandemic. Failed states. Intractable poverty. Non-state terrorists. Transnational governance of transnational corporations. Genocides in places remote from great power interests like Darfur and Rwanda. States trying to stem the tide of nuclear proliferation while insisting on retaining vast nuclear arsenals of their own. (It is often forgotten that the Charter was drafted months before the world even learned of the existence of the atomic bomb). Few of these bear much resemblance to Wehrmacht Panzer divisions racing across the Polish border on the first day of September, 1939.

In this context it is greatly disheartening to see the timid and unimaginative report that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's High Level Panel for Threats, Challenges, and Change issued on December 2nd. The panel did make a number of thoughtful recommendations about criteria for the legitimate use of force in a threat environment radically altered since 1945. But virtually since the UN's inception, those who feel like they didn't get invited to the party have pleaded to make the United Nations more legitimate, more accountable, and more representative of the peoples of the world. Toward this end the panel put forth two slightly varying proposals for expanding the Security Council's membership from 15 to 24 - six seats each for Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. That's it.

The UN's 50th anniversary year saw several initiatives that proposed a wide range of dramatic changes in the structure of the UN system. Groups like the Commission on Global Governance, the Independent Working Group on the UN in its Second Half Century, the Preferred Futures for the UN symposium, and The South Centre's For a Strong and Democratic UN commission were brimming with prominent scholars, Nobel laureates and former heads of state. But the High Level Panel said virtually nothing about the dozens of interesting ideas about the democratization of global governance put forth by these initiatives and others during 1995.

UN reform has never been much a part of the progressive pantheon. It should be now. If we believe in basic notions of democratic political participation then we should stand for giving a more direct voice in the affairs of the world to the peoples of the world ... rather than letting all the big decisions be made exclusively by "great power" governments.

The international community intends to consider the panel's recommendations at a summit of world leaders just prior to the opening of the UN's 60th General Assembly session next September. Many UN analysts believe that something may finally come of this at that time ... and that any further opportunities will likely not come again anytime soon after that. So consider some of the provocative proposals and fundamental questions that were, in the panel's report, conspicuous only by their absence:

- Is a small council of "great powers" the only possible mechanism for 21st Century global governance? Is the San Francisco Charter the only possible kind of UN Charter? What kind of UN system would we create if we were designing it from scratch today?

- Are we going to be stuck with the results of the Second World War forever until the end of time? What could be more anachronistic than a 21st Century UN owned and operated by the five winners of a conflict that ended in the first half of the last century?
- If the Security Council is going to remain as the primary center of power in the UN, why would a Nigeria or a Brazil, e.g., act to represent African or Latin American interests -- as opposed to simply Nigerian or Brazilian interests? After all, no one expects China or France or the United States on the Council today to represent Asian or European or North American interests in any way.
- Shouldn't the Arab and Muslim world so central to world politics today have some structural guarantee of permanent representation, rather than just sticking with traditional grade school definitions of geography?
- Should there be some kind of democratic legitimacy requirement, so that authoritarian governments that don't "represent" their populations in any meaningful way are not allowed to pretend to do so on the world stage?
- How about at least modifying or limiting the veto? Even though it is rarely cast, veto calculations dominate virtually every decision the Security Council makes, because it is always necessary to get all five permanent members on board. To allow a single country to defy the whole rest of the world (e.g., when the vote to retain Boutros Ghali-Ghali as UN Secretary General in 1996 was 14-1 in favor - and the one won) is to perpetuate the single most undemocratic institution in world politics today.

(It's often taken as self-evident that the U.S. "would never give up the veto" - that is, our ability to prevent the rest of the world from doing something we don't want. But the veto allows other countries to stand in our way too. One can envision the U.S. pursuing an initiative that might garner the support of 10 or 11 or even 14 Security Council members. But if Russia or China or Britain or France stand opposed, the U.S. is forced to choose between dropping the initiative, or pursuing it without Council authorization and in defiance of international law. This, of course, is precisely what happened in early 2003, when the U.S. abruptly announced that it would drop its efforts to secure a new Security Council resolution authorizing a U.S. invasion of Iraq.)

- Is the ineffectual General Assembly, scarcely mentioned in the panel's report, going to remain forever "one nation, one vote, and no power?" How about considering some kind of weighted voting (already used in both the international financial institutions and the EU)? Such a system could take into account not just population, but also financial contributions to the UN and other common international purposes. (Professor Joseph Schwartzberg of the University of Minnesota has performed elaborate mathematical analyses of how various alternative schemes of this kind might operate in practice.) More importantly, how about giving the General Assembly the same kind of power to enact binding international law over at least certain matters that the Security Council now possesses over war and peace matters?
- How about a global forum of non-governmental organizations, since national governments are hardly the only international actors in the 21st Century?
- How about a parliamentary assembly, where select national parliamentarians would convene a few times a year in an international forum? Even if only advisory, they would provide a much more direct voice for ordinary citizens on the world stage than executive branch diplomats.
- Even better, how about creating a directly elected "People's Assembly" to stand alongside the General Assembly? Professor Richard Falk of Princeton University and Professor Andrew Strauss of Widener University have written about this idea in fora like Foreign Affairs magazine and the International Herald Tribune. Even if only advisory, this body would recognize that just as people in most democracies elect particular individuals to represent them at the local, regional, and national levels, so too might they do so at the global level. And we've already

got a directly elected transnational assembly in at least one place - the European Parliament. Such a global people's assembly could open the gates to the emergence of transnational political parties - a historic step forward for democratic political participation.

- Can we envision some sort of body that would not just represent parts of the whole, but endeavor to articulate the perspective of the whole, the transnational vital interest, the global public good? George F. Kennan, America's great centenarian sage, has floated the idea of creating some kind of "Global House of Councilors," whose members would represent not any particular state or region, but the welfare of the whole of the human community. They would seek to nurture what the great psychologist Erik Erikson called an "all-human solidarity," what Kennan's Princeton colleague Robert C. Tucker calls an "ethic of specieshood," what Voltaire called "the party of humanity."

Few of these ideas, of course, are politically realistic in the near term. But how can we ever change the political realities of the near term if we don't even discuss what might be desirable in the long term? Couldn't the panel have both made specific recommendations to be considered during the 60th anniversary year and put forth some ideas that might be explored further down the road? If politics, as every undergraduate knows, is the art of the possible, shouldn't panels such as this at least try to serve as a catalyst for expanding the parameters of political possibility?

Drive from San Francisco across the Golden Gate Bridge and turn left, and you will arrive before long at John Muir Woods, home of the oldest living things on Planet Earth. Walk along the path back into the forest for a few miles, and you will come across a heavy metal and stone plaque set squarely into the earth. It's dated April 29, 1945 - ten days before the surrender of Nazi Germany, more than three months before the atomic devastation of Japan, not yet three weeks since the death of arguably the greatest statesman of the age. The plaque says this: "Here in this grove of enduring redwoods, preserved for posterity, members of the United Nations Conference on International Organizations met on April 29, 1945, to honor the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Thirty-Second President of the United States, Chief Architect of the United Nations, and Apostle of Lasting Peace for all Mankind."

Get back on the Golden Gate Bridge and cross back into San Francisco, then head east until you get to the Washington, DC. Make your way to the Washington Mall and the Jefferson Memorial. There you will find these words: "I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions. But laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. ... We might as well require a man still to wear the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors."

For those who aspire to lasting peace today, it's time to seek some imaginative new architects. It's time to stop being held hostage by the designs of our barbarous ancestors. It's time to fashion a grown-up coat for the storms of the 21st Century.

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