

Reforming the UN for the 21st Century

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What is wrong with the UN and why does it need fixing?

Thanks to Brian Wesley and UNA Eastern Region for inviting me to speak today at Cambridge. It is great to be among an audience of dedicated peace activists who are a driving force behind all change and who keep a check on the excesses of governments and leaders. I am also thankful for you to send me a proposal from UNA Sudbury Branch for discussion which I will be referring to it later or in Q/A session.

The title of today's talk, 'Reforming the UN for the 21st Century,' suggests in itself that there is something wrong with the UN which needs reforming and fixing. It is fair to say that the UN does a lot of things which are right which one can be proud of like its peacekeeping operations, formation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto Protocol and so on. Since its establishment on the ruins after two deadliest conflicts in human history, the United Nations, with its unique legitimacy and universality, has been regarded as the centrality of global multilateral governance, which member states would turn to in time of crisis.

Decades of experience has proved the relevance and indispensable role of the United Nations in maintaining peace and security and promoting prosperity and welfare of the populations, as it has been the case with the most recent natural disasters in Haiti and Pakistan.

At the same time, there are moments of powerlessness when the UN is dysfunctional, crippled and cannot resolve situations as in Darfur, the war in Afghanistan and conflict in Middle East. Despite all merits, however, people are beginning to question its effectiveness in fulfilling its duties, especially when they witnessed the breakout of the Iraq war, slow anti-poverty progress, the worst global financial and economic crisis in decades, failure at Copenhagen climate talks and stalled negotiations over trade and disarmament.

The role of UN in establishing a peaceful world is a tall order. It as much depends on the effectiveness of the UN peacekeeping operations as the willingness and desire of the warring parties to live in peace. Afghanistan is an example where 150,000 troops with high tech weapons on the ground and air are not able to contain violence and enforce peace. The same can be said about the reforms of the United Nations. They are urgently needed and overdue, especially the veto powers of the Security Council, the general assembly, its membership, funding and the way it's peacekeeping and peace building is carried out. The willingness and ability of member countries to agree to workable and pragmatic reforms for UN is a prerequisite for it to become a fit enough organisation to tackle the challenges of the 21st century.

The perception is that the UN is ineffective at peacekeeping, incapable of reforming itself and is therefore not able to fulfil its vision and mandate for which it was created.

“... to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war which in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind.” (Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations)

Former Secretary General Kofi Annan famously called the UN “the only fire brigade in the world that has to acquire a fire engine after the fire has started.” Even when peacekeeping is the most appropriate protection tool, the UN must always overcome significant challenges to deploy and support each new mission.

Peacekeeping Operations

With the current global security threats, rise of military spending and wars demand for peacekeeping operations is increasing all the time. United Nation needs to be strengthened to effectively deal with increasing international peace and security challenges.

Peacekeeping institution is not mention in the UN's original charter. Dag Hammarskjold, UN secretary general seized the opportunity of the Suez Crisis created by Britain and France's invasion of Egypt in 1956 to persuade governments to create peacekeeping forces.

At present, the worsening world situation is being dealt by UN peace keeping operations in over 40 conflicts raging around the world at the same time there are UN peacekeeping missions in 18 countries deploying 120,000 peacekeeping personnel from 119 countries. These are engaged in trying to keep peace on four continents. From Sri Lanka to Afghanistan, Sudan to Colombia. To keep these peacekeeping operations going, the UN has a tiny budget for 2008-2009 was \$4.7 billion for UN activities, staff and infrastructure. Citizens of the United States approximately spend the same amount on cut flowers and potted plants each year.

Ordinary civilians bear the brunt of violence. In war 90% of the casualties are women and children. A report by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), says that armed violence costs Guatemala more than \$ 2.4 billion a year in keeping public security and health care. It is the same scenario in other countries where water supplies, hospitals and bridges are destroyed by war and have to be rebuilt after the war is over.

I am going to suggest reforms of peacekeeping operations which should include more emphasis on:

- Using preventative diplomacy against the surge of war
- Prioritising, taking measures for protection of civilians against violence
- Continuing the work on general and complete disarmament, including nuclear weapons and conventional weapons.
- Promoting a culture of peace, reconciliation and non-violence as a vision of future peacekeeping
- Dealing with violations of human rights as a precondition for peacekeeping
- Convening a World Summit on disarmament, non-proliferation and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction & exploring innovative ways of peacekeeping.
- Making UN peacekeeping a global partnership, a united body more effective with a fast turnaround
- UN should provide better peacekeeping training and support regional peacekeeping training centres to increase global peacekeeping capacity, with tactical and strategic lift capacity, and other 'enablers' like helicopters to help UN missions deploy quickly and completely.
- UN peacekeeping missions should only be deployed where mandates are achievable.
- The UN should work with regional partners such as the EU and the African Union to develop protection capacities that can be deployed quickly and respond effectively to counter threats against civilians.
- The UN should support the Responsibility to Protect as a global norm and use diplomatic resources to advance the concept among countries.

Institutional reforms (Security Council and General Assembly)

Some of the essential reforms needed to deal with the five permanent members and their excessive power.

1. Widen the membership of the Security Council to make it more representative.

2. Tackle the veto – which puts all major reforms under the control of the existing permanent members.
3. Change the way in which the SC orders military action in order to control the process.
4. Work for General Assembly regaining its powers and develop the ‘responsibility to protect’, a concept supported by the discussions at the UN General Assembly in September 2005.

UN Security Council has subsidiary bodies for maintaining international peace and security. These are: Peace Building Commission, Sanctions Committee, Counter-Terrorism Committee, 1540 Committee, UN Compensation Commission, International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia and Rwanda and UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Committee.

The primary responsibility placed upon the Security Council for the maintenance of international peace and security is thus matched by the authority that is given to it and that can be exercised to reduce the risk of WMD, whether in the hands of the five permanent members or other members of the United Nations, or non-state actors. This broad authority also raises some questions. It makes the Council legislator, judge and enforcer. All 192 UN member states could become obliged to act in accordance with injunctions that could be decided by as few as 15 Council members. Is the Council sufficiently representative of the world to carry such responsibility, or does the composition need to be improved? Do new rules, or at least practices, need to be developed to ensure adequate consultation between the members of the organisation that will be bound by decisions, and the members of the Security Council that will take the decisions?

UN reforms should make the Security Council more representative of the UN membership, so that binding decisions are taken by effective consultation to ensure that they are supported by the members of the UN and will be accepted and respected.

The position of the five permanent members is no longer the sole major powers in the world; the re-emergence of Germany and Japan since the end of the war; and the coming development of states such as India and Brazil who are changing the line-up of world powers. We also require the restatement of international law and the return to the proper functioning of the UN Security Council as the sole arbiter of the right to go to war. Finally, it is essential to stabilise the membership of the Council.

One of the tasks must be to see that the Council properly represents those powers that are economically able to assist the Secretary General in carrying out his (or her) functions in maintaining world peace and security. Such stability must also include a regional balance of permanent or semi-permanent members as it does already with its two-year rotating membership. There can be no place for a council which has three permanent members from Europe while South America and Africa have none.

What are the origins of the veto?

One of the traditional stumbling blocks has been the existence of the veto power of the Council's permanent members, which enables any one of the so-called P-5 (France, the United Kingdom, the United States, China and Russia) to block any resolution that is not merely procedural in nature. The veto is considered fundamentally unjust by a majority of States and is thought to be the main reason why the Council failed to respond adequately to humanitarian crises such as in Rwanda (1994) and Darfur (2004). It is thus not surprising that most States wish to abolish or restrain the veto. Equally unsurprising is the fact that the P-5, whose concurring votes and ratifications are required for even the smallest amendment of the UN Charter (pursuant to articles 108 and 109), reject any limitation of the veto outright. For this reason, many States have abandoned radical reform proposals and have adopted a pragmatic approach, pleading in particular for voluntary restraint on the veto use.

Furthermore, the focus of the discussion seems to have shifted to the question whether the possible enlargement of the number of permanent seats should result in a parallel expansion of the veto or not.

Modifying the Veto

From the beginning the veto has been an anachronism. It has prevented the membership of the General Assembly, now over 192, from making many crucial decisions. The effect of the veto is to destroy its democratic nature.

In its proposals the High Level Panel was strongly against any extension of the veto. They recognized that the veto “had an important function in reassuring the UN’s most powerful members that their interests would be safeguarded”. While they could see “no practical way of changing the existing members’ veto powers” they recognized that it was out of tune in an increasingly democratic age and urged that its use be limited by voluntary action to matters of vital national interests. When we realize that veto powers are reminiscent of a colonial era we must look forward to a time when the national interests of five permanent members are no longer considered more important than those of the other 192!

Making Constitutional Decisions

Constitutional decisions in the General Assembly require not only a two thirds majority of members but the positive votes of each of the permanent members. Their power of veto is exercised across the board in decisions of both the Security Council and the Assembly.

Ever since the Great Powers gave birth to the United Nations, the veto debate has been extremely emotionally charged. Often the debates have resembled those of a squabbling couple, with both parties – the P-5 and other UN Member States – presenting their views and not giving much attention to the validity of the other’s arguments. As the veto again turns out to be the decisive issue of Charter reform, it is time for the two sides to get back on speaking terms. Non-Council UN Member States should abandon claims that the veto has become obsolete since the end of the Cold War and recognise that “trying to get rid of the veto is like trying to get rid of politics”. These States have to admit that the United Nations cannot function properly without the support of the world’s most powerful States. Therefore, safeguarding the essential interests of the latter States is the necessary price to pay. Moreover, it should be conceded that the Security Council is not the only UN body in need of reform and that occasionally objectionable voting behaviour is not restricted to the P-5 alone. We can only hope that use of the veto is done in a more cautious way by the P-5.

The General Assembly – regaining its powers and claiming new responsibilities

The Charter makes it clear that the General Assembly of all member states is the primary UN body. Article 15 says that “the Assembly shall receive and consider annual and special reports from the Security Council... and from the other Organs of the United Nations”.

The chief limitation on its powers comes from Article 12 which lies down that when the Security Council is exercising its functions in dealing with matters of peace and security the Assembly shall refrain from making any recommendations. While this is a necessary condition it should be modified by a new rule which should be mutually agreed by both institutions.

In cases such as the management of relations with Iraq, which began after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and has no sign of ending till now, the General Assembly has been virtually silenced. It must be possible for an interregnum to be agreed between them so that the stewardship of the Security Council can be investigated and if necessary challenged.

The powers of the General Assembly should be enhanced so that it can play a vital role debating and deciding important international issues. At present, each autumn, it is faced with a daunting agenda and same resolutions year after year are put forward for discussion. The GA has ongoing 9,000 or so mandates, some of which are obsolete and redundant. Unfortunately, this responsibility has not been fulfilled till now. The UN's agenda should be streamlined in order to devote more time to pressing threats and challenges facing the world today.

On a positive note, the General Assembly has powers which can be activated for bringing Peace as the **Uniting for Peace** resolution of 1950 which was used to override the monopoly of Security Council for resolving the war in Suez.

Creating a UN fit for the 21st century

Both models for Security Council expansion contained in the High-Level Panel Report have both advantages and disadvantages. There is agreement, however that the Council should be expanded to increase the representation of developing countries and the chief financial contributors to the UN. There should be a restriction of the Security Council veto so that the veto is applied neither to situations related to genocide nor to the process of appointing the Secretary-General. As a longer-term objective, to seek the restriction of the veto to Chapter VII resolutions and, eventually, its abolition. A stronger role is advocated for the General Assembly in the area of peace and security.

Only by an effort on this scale – a management reform as broad as it is deep – can we create a United Nations Secretariat that is fully equipped to implement all its mandates, using the resources of its Member States wisely and accounting for them fully, and winning the trust of the broader world community. In an age when more and more of the problems facing humanity are global and the world has more and more need for a global institution through which to forge and implement global strategies, it is more than ever necessary for the United Nations to live up to the promise of its Charter – and, above all, to the demands and hopes of present and future generations.

There are other reforms of the UN - eliminating human rights abuses, much needed funding for the UN, gender issues including the empowerment of women, system wide coherence – that are urgently needed to make the UN an effective, transparent and democratic institution.

We have covered a lot of ground today from the role of the UN in international peace and security to reforms of the UN. Let me conclude by saying the United Nations is the most universal world body. The priority in 2010 would be for the United Nations and its agencies to live up to their original mandate, which was to bring all nations of the world together to work for peace and development, based on the principles of justice, human dignity and the well-being of all people.

Let me conclude by saying that we have just drawn down the curtain on the bloodiest century of human history. Let us make the 21st century less violent than the one before and the UN has the tools to achieve it. Let me reassert that the future of the UN lies in it as a major contributor of people and ideas. UN should mobilise international civil society and global public opinion to carry forward a vision for a just and fairer world. Its strength is evident from the fact that when the United Nations passes a resolution, it is seen as speaking for humanity as a whole, thus giving it unique legitimacy and support for an action to be taken by a country. 192 member states should embark on a reform agenda for Security Council which will make UN accountable, transparent and democratic decision making body, an organisation fit for facing challenges and threats of 21st century successfully.

Thank you for listening.

Notes

The following publications were consulted and excerpts have been taken from them during the writing of this article:

1. **How Peace Keeping works** - BBC World
2. Prompt Global Strike: Pentagon Plans series of 5-10 year wars
3. Research Institute (SIPRI). "**Recent Trends in Military Expenditures**". http://web.sipri.org/contents/milap/milex/mex_trends.html 2009
4. "**Reforming the UN for the 21st Century**" – 8th December, 2008
Talk by Vijay Mehta at Royal Over Seas Club, Edinburgh Scotland
5. "**World Security, Global Governance and the role of the UN**" – 29th October, 2008
Talk by Vijay Mehta at House of Lords, London
6. "**World Trends – Fights among neighbours are the hardest to end**", New York Times / The Observer London, May 31st 2009.
7. Wars, Guns and Votes – Author Paul Collier, Oxford University
8. "**An apathetic, greedy west has abandoned war-torn Congo**" – The Guardian, 18 June 2009
9. Brookings Europe and the emerging powers at the G8 summit, July 1st 2009
10. "**Who's Priorities?**" A guide for campaigners on military and social spending – Colin Archer, International Peace Bureau, www.ipb.org
11. "**The Role of UN in Establishing a More Peaceful World**" – 21st September, 2010
Talk by Vijay Mehta at The United Reform Church, Havant (UK)

The full version of this speech can be downloaded from:

VM Centre for Peace
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www.vmpeace.org
www.action-for-un-renewal.org.uk

Vijay Mehta is president of VM Centre for Peace www.vmpeace.org, Founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity www.fortuneforum.org, Chair of Uniting for Peace (Action for UN Renewal and World Disarmament Campaign). He is an author and global activist for peace, development, human rights and the environment. Some of his notable books are The Fortune Forum Summit. For a Sustainable Future, Arms No More, and The United Nations and Its Future in the 21st Century.

He along with his daughter Renu Mehta founder of Fortune Forum charity held two summits in London in 2006 and 2007. The summits raised over a million pounds for charity and attracted a worldwide audience of 1.3 billion people (one fifth of humanity) including print and media coverage. The keynote speakers for the first and second summit were Bill Clinton, former US President and Al Gore, former US vice-President, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize 2007.

Vijay Mehta has appeared in various TV programmes including BBC World, Press TV, Ajtak-24 hour Indian news channel, and Think Peace documentary, Canada, among others. The Sunday Times, Independent, Observer and Guardian newspapers, among other journals have written about him. His life is devoted to the service of peace, humanity and our planet

At present, Vijay Mehta is writing a book to be published in 2011. The subject is "Military Expenditure and its Relation to Poverty Reduction"