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SECURITY COUNCIL REFORM: THE P5's RESPONSIBILITY TO ACT

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Among the many bitter lessons the international community must learn from the debacle of Iraq is the urgency of making multilateralism function better. Reforming the United Nations Security Council is central to this task.

The need for Security Council reform is universally recognized. The present composition of the Council has remained unchanged since 1965, when four non-permanent seats were added to the original composition of five permanent members (China, France, Russia, UK and US) plus six non-permanent seats. UN membership has since increased from 118 to 192.

More importantly, the present permanent membership does not reflect well the power distribution of the contemporary world. Apart from the already untenable fact that the five major victors of World War II (and their successor states) still monopolize the permanent membership, disparities are growing between the decision-making power commanded by the five permanent members (P5) and the resources required to implement Security Council resolutions.

The High Level Panel convened by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan prior to the UN's 60th anniversary in 2005 pointed out that the financial and military contributions made by some of the P5 were "modest compared to their special status". Indeed, more than 85% of troops deployed for UN peacekeeping operations come from developing countries, which seldom sit at the Council. In 2006, three countries without permanent membership (Japan, Germany and Italy) together bore more than one-third of the rapidly increasing costs of such operations.

For many years, Japan by itself paid more than the total of the contributions made by UK, France, China and Russia for the UN peacekeeping and regular budgets. Even after the adoption of the revised scale of assessment last year, Japan's share (16.6%) remains almost equal to the total of the four countries' contributions.

Moreover, the scope of expertise and experience required for Security Council activities is expanding rapidly as the issues the Council has to address have become increasingly diverse: from state-to-state conflicts to terrorism by non-state actors; from peacekeeping to peace-building; from DDR (disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation) to nation-building; from protection of refugees and internally displaced people to prevention of pandemics; and so on.

Against this backdrop, UN Member States have been working to reform the Council since 1993. However, they have so far failed to produce an agreed reform plan. Their leaders have done no more than repeat commitments to make efforts for the early realization of reform on three politically important occasions: the 50th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations in 1995, the UN Millennium Summit Meeting in 2000, and the organization's 60th anniversary in 2005.

This failure of will is largely attributable to the fact that debates on reform have been dominated by a tug-of-war between those aspiring to attain permanent membership and those who want either to prevent certain countries from becoming permanent members or to prevent the further spread of the veto power. This has allowed the P5, which should have otherwise had to play a leading role in enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of the Security Council, to remain bystanders with regard to this important issue.

Nevertheless, a broad consensus is emerging in support of the idea of adding both permanent members and non-permanent seats and, to that end, increasing the total number of Council seats to around 24. This was reflected in the two options proposed by the High Level Panel: one option proposed increasing the Council's seats by adding six new permanent members without veto power and three non-permanent seats, and the other adding eight four-year renewable seats without veto power and one non-permanent seat.

Both options, however, had a serious shortcoming. Neither addressed the issue of the P5's veto power. Admitting that "we see no practical way of changing the existing members' veto powers", the Panel did no more than urge the P5 to limit the use of the veto to matters where their vital interests are genuinely at stake.

Regrettably, this approach ignored the fact that the Council could not act on many critical issues due to a veto exercised by one or more permanent members. Prolonged negotiations among P5 members with the veto power in their pockets often resulted in the Council's failure to act in timely and appropriate ways. Worse, the Council has been bypassed at times in attempts to circumvent such awkward

eventualities.

Indeed, a “significant majority” of UN Member States are critical of the veto, according to a more realistic report to the President of the General Assembly produced in April of this year by the “Facilitators” appointed by the President. The Facilitators carefully canvassed the opinions of Member State delegations on Security Council reform.

Limitation in the use of the veto should therefore be an important part of a reform package, and, to this end, any plan to let new permanent members forfeit the veto power should be matched with some compromise by the P5 with regard to the way they exercise the veto. A pledge by the P5 to refrain from exercising the veto on actions required to stop humanitarian crises, or to fulfill the “responsibility to protect” incumbent on UN Member States, is, for example, one of the oft-cited practical suggestions to this end.

Such a bargain has not been pursued in reform debates to date. On the contrary, most UN members, including those aspiring to become permanent members, have opted to defer discussion on the issue of the veto power until the last stage of reform negotiations. Given the P5’s apparent wish to protect their prerogatives, it was obvious that discussing the veto issue at the beginning would be a self-defeating strategy. Moreover, given also that the question of whether to give the veto power to new permanent members is intrinsically linked to the question of what sort of countries should be selected as new permanent members, discussing the veto issue before possible candidates for new permanent membership become identifiable would have thrown the discussion out of focus.

Now that consensus is emerging, albeit in the form of options, on a framework for Security Council reform and possible candidates for new permanent membership have become identifiable, the time has come for the international community to address squarely the crucial issue of the veto.

Given that no bargain involving the question of the veto power can be struck without the P5’s willingness to cooperate, it is the P5’s high international

responsibility to act on this critical issue and realize Security Council reform, which is indeed long overdue.

United States leadership is crucial in realizing Security Council reform. If the experience of Iraq is returning Americans' attention to the importance of multilateralism, Security Council reform would be an appropriate task for the United States to undertake in order to demonstrate a renewed commitment to the most important multilateral organization, that is the United Nations. Debates preceding the next Presidential election provide ideal opportunities to address this subject of historic significance.

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