



COMMENTARY

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Leadership vs. Stewardship: Advice for the New UN Ambassador

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"I think engagement is a tool. It's not an end in itself, but it's a tool that can shape behavior. But you have to take [the] interest of others into account." — **Zalmay Khalilzad, testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 15, 2007**

As Zalmay Khalilzad prepares to head to New York as the top U.S. representative to the United Nations, a collective sigh of relief can be heard from Turtle Bay, and not just from our adversaries. The U.S. image is in need of serious repair at the United Nations and sending an ambassador who has the formal backing of the U.S. Senate and the confidence of the White House is the right formula to begin putting U.S.-UN relations back on track. Having just returned from two of the toughest overseas posts — Afghanistan and Iraq — New York might seem to the ambassador like a picnic in comparison. However, there is hard work to do at the United Nations, and Khalilzad must get his footing early to be able to restore the view that the world's only superpower really does respect world opinion and intends to step up to its role as both leader and steward of the international organization.

Whether as a member of the Security Council or in UN administrative committees, the credibility of the United States is inextricably tied to the international organization. Our success in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the ability to influence a reasonable outcome on the proliferation intentions of Iran and North Korea, require the diligence of the entire world, even when it cannot agree.

The United Nations is a powerful tool that the United States has not always used to its advantage, or with integrity. While there are serious international issues at hand, Khalilzad will also have to deal with the minutiae of the United Nations, whether his government wants him to or not. His stewardship is needed on reform, staffing, and paying our tab. His leadership is needed to recalibrate the U.S.-UN relationship, which has been dragged down by the in-your-face diplomacy of the last few years.

I offer this advice to the new ambassador, keeping my fingers crossed for a successful tenure and a restoration of the common interests shared by the United States and the United Nations.

Mr. Ambassador, manage where you must and lead where you can. Remember, the world still listens to the United States, despite how wrong we've been recently. The United Nations needs our leadership, and the membership wants us to take a more active role as a full participant, not simply using the Security Council to make our case when it suits our interests.

Stewardship. The United Nations is not broken as some would have us believe; just neglected by its membership. Calling for UN reform has become a mantra for those in Washington who believe the organization is impotent. But a sharp division has arisen between those who beat the drum of reform as a cure-all and those who recognize that the situation inside the United Nations is much more complicated than it appears on the surface. Furthermore, there is a wide-spread belief that U.S. positions on reform are brazen power plays and tactics that the superpower will use to diminish the influence of nonaligned countries within UN committees and bureaus. Adding to this notion is the tendency of the U.S. Congress to attempt to impose the will of individual senators and representatives on the United Nations, ignoring the complex system of programs, departments, and projects that are already under the constant scrutiny of the member states.

Improvements take place everyday at the United Nations. Maybe not in leaps and bounds, but innovative techniques are adopted, money is saved, and projects are reviewed all the time. One important area where the institution has made significant strides is within certain agency and project procurement systems where efficiency levels now rival private-sector competitors in international bidding. Reform is not a panacea, and it is now Khalilzad's job to convince Congress to stop micromanaging the United Nations.

Mr. Ambassador, don't listen to members of Congress when they tell you that they have sweeping answers to UN reform. Most of them have never even been inside the building, let alone understand the complexity of the departments or functions of the organization. Moreover, it is important for you to convince member states that the United States wants to make the United Nations stronger, more efficient, and that a weak United Nations benefits no one.

Ambassador Khalilzad has a real chance to help guide the international organization into the twenty-first century by helping to do away with the Byzantine hiring practices that undermine the efficiency and professionalism of the United Nations. It is no secret that the bureaucracy in New York is stale and dysfunctional. It is filled with strong personalities who use scheming tactics and cliques to manage and maneuver. This is not to say that the United Nations is full of dilettantes. On the contrary, there is an extremely high level of professionalism and developed expertise throughout, but force of personality is very important in the day-to-day management and strategic direction of the organization. Ridding it of mandatory secondments from member states, implementing limited contract hiring, and allowing directors and assistant secretaries general to find the best people to fill posts could begin to address some of these deep-seated problems in the Secretariat. Staffing procedures should not be held hostage by country politics, not even our own.

Ambassador Khalilzad, the global human resources market is the richest it has ever been, and it is time that the United Nations is given the authority to recruit, hire, and pay for the best talent it can find. Doing this will no doubt get you into trouble in your own State Department and on Capitol Hill, but Kabul and Baghdad earned you a lot of political capital inside the Beltway. Spend some of it on this.

Another issue in need of the ambassador's attention is money. The United States could increase its credibility among member states by simply paying its dues and debts on time and in full. Since the 1980s, every time the United States has been politically frustrated by the United Nations, the automatic response has been to withhold a portion of our dues. At one point in 1999, the U.S. debt was \$1.5 billion. Even though we paid about two-thirds of that, we still stiffed the organization by about a half billion dollars. The words shameful and humiliating come to mind, not to mention that such a practice is a flagrant treaty violation of our legal obligation to pay what we agreed to pay.

Anyone who has spent time on the ground and in the field, as Khalilzad has, understands how a lack of resources can mortally wound people and projects, but also how eroding it is to our credibility. With two wars still raging and the world watching us stumble time after time, we can no longer afford to be cavalier about our legal and moral responsibilities. The word of the United States ought to carry significant gravitas in every corner of the United Nations. Without the leverage of being in the black, Khalilzad's job will be unmanageable, and every conversation with another country will start with, "Has the United States paid its dues?" Members of Congress — and the American people — need to recognize that global leadership and deadbeat status cannot coexist.

Congress has to pay the UN tab, Mr. Ambassador, and you have to make sure that they do. Ask them to lift the cap on the U.S. contribution for peacekeeping so we aren't constantly in arrears. We need to make good on our financial commitments. After all, if we didn't share the burden with the United Nations in places like Haiti and Kosovo, each U.S. taxpayer would have to foot much more of the bill.

Leadership. The United States is as influential as it wants to be at the United Nations, but we are capable of so much more than has been demonstrated in the past few years. A major obstacle to effective leadership is that few U.S. envoys have had the experience or the patience for the kind of delayed diplomacy that can lead to success at the United Nations. Our diplomats have to be prepared, but more importantly they have to possess the temperament, to work within the established diplomatic protocol — an environment that is urbane, consensus oriented, exhaustively deliberative, often resistant to cooperation, and maddeningly slow. Khalilzad has already indicated in his Senate

testimony that he *gets* the reciprocity of real diplomatic leadership, but more importantly, he has demonstrated a tough-minded but respectful style of diplomacy in tricky negotiations.

Charm and aplomb can go along way at the United Nations, and as Khalilzad engages the other member states, he will have to use tactical objectives that range from simply explaining the U.S. position in UN committees, to refraining from lecturing member states on the feeble-mindedness of collective action and multilateralism, to further our influence. He has his work cut out for him. Most of the nonaligned countries (many more than just the G-77) have been across-the-board angry with the United States since the start of the Iraq war. And now with the International Compact on Iraq in play, the United States will be challenged to speak and act with one voice in order to get UN support. But our poor behavior extends beyond Iraq. The United States was a harsh critic of the old Committee on Human Rights, which was replaced last year with the newly configured Human Rights Council. Instead of running for a seat on the new panel, we chose instead to sit on the sidelines and criticize it for failing to call out obvious violations of human rights. We need to regain the trust of member states, and one way to reclaim lost ground is to realign our positions with our actions.

Mr. Ambassador, the United States must be involved in every level of UN activity, especially in the reform of the Security Council and as an active member of the Human Rights Council, bearing in mind the power of compromise in the give-and-take culture. As much as the United States takes the heat for its positions at the United Nations, many countries will still wait for a signal from us before crafting their positions. If we don't even have a seat at the table, our voice is mute and the opportunity to sway world opinion is squandered.

The United Nations is the most successful international institution ever established, and that stature has allowed the international body to set norms and standards of international behavior that one country could never impose on its own. The 62-year history of the United Nations has proven that shaming human rights abusers, curbing weapons proliferation, stopping genocide, conducting peacekeeping, and mitigating conflict are best done when the world stands together, even when the outcome is insufficient or the problem goes unsolved.

The United Nations was never intended to solve the world's problems. It was envisioned as a mechanism to manage and mitigate conflict by providing a forum for dialogue to save the world from catastrophe. But regardless of any successes that the United Nations has had over the years, it needs the might and will of the world's superpower behind it — at every level. The United Nations needs U.S. leadership in order to be a more effective body, and the United States needs the United Nations to help counter violence and threats to peace. No degree of raw power can ever substitute for the agility of leadership and the ability to bring the world together for the greater good of humanity.

Mr. Ambassador, we have a long way to go to repair our image at the United Nations. Success will depend largely on your ability to balance stewardship with leadership.

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