

The Future Role of the United Nations in Asian Peace and Security

by

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“United Nations” consists of a number of organs and performs many different roles in the field of international peace and security. These include an advocacy role played mainly by the General Assembly, a peace-brokering role played very often by the Secretary-General, and an enforcement role played by the Security Council.

Asian states recognize the importance of these various activities and have contributed to them -- including initiatives in the challenging fields of disarmament, arms control, non-proliferation, and

counter-terrorism. For example, of the 56 resolutions and decisions adopted by the General Assembly last year on disarmament-related issues, 23 -- or 41 percent -- were sponsored by Asian States. General Assembly resolutions serve primarily an advocacy role and leave implementation in the hands of the Member States, which is consistent with the non-binding nature of these resolutions. I recall the General Assembly adopting a resolution on the Cambodian question every year, even though its actual implementation would occur only years later, when peace talks were finally held and concluded in Paris.

Last year, for example, Asian states sponsored several resolutions on nuclear disarmament, though they resulted in deeply divided votes and remain largely un-implemented.

Another issue of interest to many Asian states concerned the proposed establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) in Central Asia. In 2002, the General Assembly adopted a resolution on this issue by consensus, with a specific request for the Secretary-General to work for the early establishment of such a zone. Based on this resolution and previous mandates, the UN's Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific is continuing its efforts to assist the negotiation of a Treaty to establish such a zone. This work on behalf of a NWFZ in Central Asia is an example of peace-brokering or catalytic role of the United Nations -- such a role can be endorsed by the Security Council or undertaken on the Secretary-General's own initiative.

On the current nuclear issue in the DPRK, the Secretary-General has played a behind-the-scenes role in initiating the dialogue between the DPRK and the other countries concerned, but currently remains on the sidelines of the six-party talks, except for the exploratory role being played by the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy, Maurice Strong. The UN effort is intended to complement -- not to compete with -- the six-party talks and to promote a peaceful resolution of this dispute, while advancing humanitarian goals.

Under the UN Charter, the Security Council is the final arbiter of peace and security issues, but its performance was seriously questioned at the time of the war in Iraq last year. This led the Secretary-General to include in his address to the General Assembly last September an initiative to establish a High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. He drew attention to the urgent need for the Security Council to regain the confidence of the world both by demonstrating its ability to deal effectively with the most difficult issues, and by becoming more broadly representative. Among the issues being addressed by this Panel include the prospect that individual States may use force "pre-emptively" against perceived threats. The Panel will be addressing the criteria for an early authorization of coercive measures to address certain types of threats -- for instance, terrorist groups armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) -- and to engage in serious discussions of the best way to respond to threats of genocide or other comparable massive violations of human rights.

I would add that the High Level Panel will also benefit from the counsel offered by the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters on the issues relating to both disarmament and non-proliferation.

Given the implications of nuclear crises for international peace and security, it is not surprising that the Security Council would take a keen interest in such issues. Yet the Security Council's specific responses have varied over the years depending on the issue, and will likely continue to do so. Thus, while the Council is continuing to monitor nuclear developments in the DPRK, much will depend upon the outcome of the 6-Party Talks or any related negotiations -- and the United Nations may well become more deeply involved with this issue in the future. The IAEA has contributions to make in nuclear verification and the Security Council will have its own potential roles to play, including the endorsement of any agreed settlement or the provision of a security guarantee.

By contrast, the nuclear issue in Iran has yet to reach the Security Council, and with respect to India and Pakistan, the Security Council adopted a resolution condemning their nuclear tests in 1998 and calling upon them to renounce nuclear weapons, but the resolution remains largely unimplemented. The United Nations so far remains rather inactive in the sub-region except for the deployment of UNMOGIP in Kashmir.

Individually or collectively, these challenges are testing the capabilities of the Council, as the world community awaits to see if it can perform a timely and effective role to deal with the emerging WMD questions in troubled regions.

In recent years, the Security Council and other parts of the United Nations have also been devoting greater attention to the dangers posed by the possible spread of WMD to terrorists and other non-state actors. Most significantly, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1540 this year, which required all UN Member States to take specific actions against this threat and which also established a committee to oversee its implementation. How much the resolution can help prevent proliferation of WMD to terrorists will greatly depend on how firmly and extensively the Committee pursues its implementation.

During the panel discussion yesterday, one panellist mentioned the stagnation of Security Council works on terrorism. Well, recently the Security Council updated Resolution 1373 that was adopted shortly after the September 11 tragedy in 2001, and decided to reorganize its Counter-Terrorism Committee by establishing a new Executive Directorate, headed by Ambassador Javier Rupérez to assist the works of the Committee. The Executive Directorate is in the process of assembling its staff.

After all it is up to the Members, and especially the Permanent Members of the Security Council to decide what action the Council should take as to its role as ultimate arbiter of international peace and security. After the end of the Cold War we have seen a drastic increase in the activities of the Council. For example, last year the Council adopted 67 resolutions while during the height of Cold War, e.g. 1983, the Council adopted mere 17 resolutions and these did not include any resolution concerning the biggest issues of those days, Afghanistan and Cambodia.

Consequently, there is a risk that a resolution, once adopted, becomes quickly one of many resolutions unattended by the Council. These days Member States concerned have to go around actively in order to secure implementation of a resolution. In that sense, establishment of a Security Council Committee for implementation or a group of experts help create a built-in mechanism for the implementation of a resolution.

In that respect, whether the U.N. Secretariat should possess some new WMD verification functions -- concerning biological weapons and missiles for example -- or not is an intensively discussed question these days. I am not here for any sales campaign but if the world needs it, the Secretariat will be ready to work on it, or to assist in implementing any other peace and security arrangement.

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