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**Likely reforms are timely but more is needed from major nations**

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The reconvening of the United Nations General Assembly in New York last week marked the start of a big year for the international organisation.

Two major reform projects are currently underway. They tackle, respectively, security and economic development – the yin and the yang of global welfare. Each of these parallel processes will produce reports in December, for resolution in twelve months' time. Together, they present the world with a notable opportunity.

The first is the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, charged by Kofi Annan with identifying the key threats to international peace and security, undertaking a tough evaluation of existing policies and capacities, and recommending changes to ensure collective action against these threats. The Panel includes heavy hitters including former Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans, and is serviced by a high-powered secretariat.

Many have tried to reform the UN without success. However this time things may be different. The organisation has had a dreadful couple of years, and Annan and his colleagues have an appetite for strong meat. It appears that the Panel will serve it up.

Institutional reform is the first item on the menu. A recommendation is likely to come forward to remake the Security Council into a three-tier body, comprising the current permanent veto-wielding members and elected members, along with a new category of semi-permanent members, elected for five year terms from regional groupings. Such a model would increase the Council's legitimacy by making membership more representative, as regional powers such as Brazil, India and Japan would likely win a guernsey. If election to the semi-permanent seats were to privilege those candidates which contribute to global security, it could also bolster the Council's effectiveness.

Other possible proposals include: sharper criteria for the use of force; additional support for regional organisations seeking to contribute to neighbourhood security and rehabilitate failed states; and the expansion of the UN secretariat's analytical capacity.

The second project sits on the development side of the ledger. It is an ambitious UN-led attempt to achieve progress against the Millennium Development Goals, set in September 2000. The Goals, which are translated into precise targets, include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education, promotion of gender equality, reduction of child mortality, improvement of maternal health, combating of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, and development of environmental sustainability.

There is a long history, of course, of brave development targets which are spectacularly unmet. However, the Millennium Development Goals have been endorsed repeatedly by practically everyone in the international system, including the United States. Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs is marshalling impressive intellectual resources to draw up business plans to meet them.

No doubt some will dismiss both the High Level Panel and the Millennium Project as so much windbaggage. This line is unconvincing. For the first time in many years, serious people are taking a hard run at interrelated and seemingly intractable problems.

Of course, creative solutions are insufficient. The UN can identify the ends, but only states possess the means to achieve them.

The US reaction to the Panel's report is critical. It will depend in part on whether the victor in November is looking to return to the tradition of working with and through other nations to project American influence. Just as important to the Panel's success, however, will be a recognition on the part of other states that the US occupies a unique position in the international system, with special strengths and vulnerabilities.

The same condition applies in relation to the Millennium Development Goals. The Goals make development more transparent and measurable – they enable us to hold our leaders' feet to the fire. But real improvements in the wellbeing of the world's poor will require discipline on the part of the developing world and far-sightedness on the part of the developed world. For countries such as Australia, far-sightedness requires a decent level of foreign aid. Currently Australia contributes only two-and-a-half tenths of one percent of our national income in aid – less than half the internationally reaffirmed target. Even more importantly, developed countries should move to liberalise their markets so that developing countries can earn the income they need to drive their growth.

Given the coincidence of the two processes, it may be possible to address the problems of security and development together rather than separately. There has been discussion, for example, of a 'grand bargain' in which the West pledges serious resources towards poverty reduction in return for assistance from developing countries on terrorism and WMD proliferation.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a generation of policymakers rehabilitated much of Europe and Asia, a task described by Dean Acheson as being only a little 'less formidable than that described in the first chapter of Genesis... to create a world out of chaos.'

Sixty years on, our tasks are almost as biblical in their difficulty. Only true believers think that global peace and prosperity are on the way. But progress can be made on both fronts – if the likely intelligence and wit of the two reform projects is matched by political leadership on the part of national governments, not least Australia's.

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