

Michael Fullilove

Reform panel is last-ditch chance for UN to regain credible authority

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Its hardest task will be getting some nations to accept a change in the power balance, writes Michael Fullilove.

A week ago the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, announced the appointment of a high-level panel on reform of the international system. The membership of the panel reads like a who's who of the international great and good, including not only UN stalwarts such as Gro Harlem Brundtland, but heavy-hitters such as the former US national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, the former Chinese foreign minister, Qian Qichen, and the former Russian prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov.

The inclusion of Australia's former foreign minister, Gareth Evans, on the panel caused a ripple of comment in the Australian press. But the broader significance of the panel seems to have been missed in this country. In part, this is understandable. Reform of the UN is the hardy perennial of international relations, always leafy but never quite flowering.

However, the indications are that, at last, UN reform is no longer just New York cocktail chatter. Its time may have come. Annan's panel is charged with identifying the key threats to international peace and security and recommending changes to ensure effective collective action against them.

The UN has been badly shaken by events of the past year. In particular, it suffered a devastating one-two punch over Iraq, with the US decision to sideline the Security Council followed by the murderous attack on the organisation's headquarters in Baghdad.

In his annual address to the General Assembly on September 23, Annan sounded very much like a Secretary-General galvanised into action, a man with a mission. It is "not enough to denounce unilateralism", he said, "unless we also face up squarely to the concerns that make some states feel uniquely vulnerable". "Hard threats", such as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, now exist in deadly combination with "soft threats", such as chronic underdevelopment. The world has come to "a fork in the road", a point at which we must decide whether to persist with the institutions and rules of global order established at the close of World War II or subject them to radical revision.

Three issues are early candidates for the panel's attention. The first is the question of reform of the Security Council, often thought of as the alpha and omega of UN reform. Many believe that the composition of the council with the victors of 1945 preserved in amber as the Permanent Five, and another 10 states elected for two-year terms by the General Assembly is no longer sustainable.

The related question is whether the permanent members' veto the threat of which was wielded by the French President, Jacques Chirac, in the countdown to war in Iraq should be given to new permanent members.

Second, many hope the council's procedures can be sharpened to better preserve international peace and security. For example, can criteria be identified to allow for the early authorisation of coercive measures against particular threats, most notably WMDs but also genocide and massive violations of human rights?

Finally, the panel will examine whether other UN organs require an overhaul. The Economic and Social Council is generally regarded as well-meaning but ornamental, and might be retooled in order to suit the times. Similarly the Trusteeship Council, established to oversee the decolonisation process, may need to be reconstituted.

Some argue that the organisation's great forum, the General Assembly, is fundamentally broken. Appearing before it in September, the Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, asked that if most of its activities ceased, "What practical difference would it make, and would anyone notice?" These are difficult questions. Everyone believes they should be raised; few agree on answers.

Running through the debate is the unresolved tension between legitimacy on the one hand and credibility on the other. An increase in the membership of the council, for example, may make it more representative of the state of the world, but less effective in dealing with threats. The US would like a UN through which it can project its power; many states are more interested in containing American power.

If the problems are complex, however, the need is urgent, particularly for a country such as Australia. As a small country, we have an important stake in a functioning rules-based international system. As a country with a proud history of UN activism, we have earned the right to contribute to the debate.

And as a country that has shown itself willing and able to intervene in conflicts, our soldiers and their families are likely to feel the consequences of the discussions.

The world has been down the path of UN reform many times before. On this occasion, there's just a chance we will stay the course.

If the panel is to succeed in its work, however, supporters of the international organisation will have to stop reflexively defending the status quo and start helping the physician to heal itself.