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United by name but not by nature, and therein lies the problem

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Two years ago, the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, told the General Assembly that the world had come to "a fork in the road", and it needed to decide how to revise the institutions and rules of global order established at the close of World War II.

As the world summit on UN reform closes, though, it is clear that few world leaders are interested in striking out on a new path. The summit has been neither a "San Francisco moment" — recalling the 1945 conference that established the international organisation — nor a complete flop. The final communique is no masterpiece, but it's not standard UN boilerplate, either.

The best elements of the document concern humanitarian intervention, development and peace building. Member states accepted that, after Somalia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda and Kosovo, a collective responsibility rests on the international community to act in a timely and decisive way to protect populations from genocide, war crimes and widespread violations of human rights.

Despite Washington's efforts, the development section is forceful and detailed, and includes an endorsement of the millennium development goals — the UN's attempt to make development transparent and measurable. There is also no question that the political momentum generated by the summit contributed to the decisions of many wealthy states to boost foreign aid budgets.

The establishment of a new peace-building commission to help deal with the security challenge of failed states was among the most creative suggestions from the Secretary-General's high-level panel. If the final details of its make-up and operation can be sorted out soon, it will play an important part in rehabilitating states that have fallen over the precipice.

When the communique is bad, however, it's horrid. The document's silence on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament — at a time when the world is concerned about the spread of nuclear weapons to Iran, North Korea and even non-state terrorists — is an indictment of the world's governments. The fact this was allowed to happen only months after the failure of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty review conference makes them repeat offenders.

Between these two extremes, progress has been made, but not on the scale the times demand. The inadequacies of the Commission on Human Rights has undermined its credibility and diminished the UN's ability to exercise moral leadership on one of its charter responsibilities. Various unpleasant regimes have sought representation on the commission, not to promote human rights but to prevent scrutiny of their own records. The creation of a smaller human rights council, then, is all to the good — so long as the membership of the new body is confined to states that abide by the highest human rights standards. However, a rearguard action is being mounted to stymie this goal.

The leaders' condemnation of "terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes" will be welcomed; the failure of states to agree on a definition of terrorism and to sign up to a comprehensive convention on terrorism will not. The pulled punches on management changes to an organisation requiring root-and-

branch reform is a disappointment — not least to the best of the UN's officials, who are true professionals, often required to work with slim resources and colleagues of variable quality.

Finally, the proposals for Security Council reform were unable to penetrate the thicket of competing national interests. For every serious candidate for permanent membership, at least two or three others were determined to defeat it.

The talks in New York will confirm the prejudices of both groupies and bashers about the flaws of both the US and the UN. In truth, Washington's negotiating strategy was neither more nor less virtuous than that of most capitals. However, its intransigence on some issues gave a licence to its opponents to play a wrecking game on others.

When all the heads of government and their entourages leave Manhattan, the UN will have been left in a stronger position to confront the threats and challenges facing the world. But we have seen the reality of the disunited nations, and it is not a pretty sight.

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