

U.S.-INDIA INSIGHT

Vol. 3, Issue 8

August 2013

The UN's 'Rubik's Cube:' Security Council Reform

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Last fall, in advance of the annual opening of the UN General Assembly, *Foreign Policy* magazine asked 61 top experts and insiders to rate the UN's biggest obstacles and what role a body founded as the "last hope of mankind" should play on today's global stage. [The survey](#) yielded several insights into what ails the UN and what should be done about it.

Q: *What single reform could make the biggest improvement in the UN's effectiveness?* A: Security Council reform.

Q: *Should the number of member states in the UN Security Council be expanded beyond 15?* A: Yes.

Q: *True or false: The Security Council would be more effective if the Permanent Five (P5) members (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the U.S.) did not have veto power.* A: False.

Q: *Which country would be your first pick to add to the Security Council's P5 members?* A: India.

These straightforward answers should provide a pathway forward for Security Council reform. But according to former secretary of state (and former U.S. ambassador to the UN) Madeleine Albright, it's not that simple. Although two-thirds of those polled by *FP* endorse the idea of enlarging the Security Council, "The reality is that finding a way to do so is like trying to solve a Rubik's cube...the Rubik's cube continues to shift—and yet the council's membership is unchanged."

A daunting challenge, to be sure, and recent U.S. administrations have demonstrated little interest or expended much energy in trying to solve the UN's Rubik's cube. But if past public statements are an indication, the next U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (just confirmed by the Senate) may be willing to have a go at it. She has certainly made the case for doing so.

Enter Samantha Power

Prior to her nomination by President Obama, Samantha Power was a Pulitzer Prize winning author (*"A Problem from Hell:" America and the Age of Genocide*) and prolific writer on international affairs, including the work of the United Nations. In a 2004 article for *Foreign Policy* "Business as Usual at the UN," she argued that the institution's "reputation rises and falls these days based on the performance and perceived legitimacy of three of its most visible components—the

"Unlocking the full potential
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UN Reform an "Onerous Process"

In a paper presented earlier this year entitled "[India and UN Reform](#)", former Indian ambassador (and veteran of UN affairs in New York and Vienna) T.P. Sreenivasan wrote: "The framers of the UN Charter did not intend that it should be amended easily." A December 2010 [report](#) by the Council on Foreign Relations ("UN Security Council Enlargement and U.S. Interests") put that same thought somewhat differently: "Amending the UN Charter is an onerous process."

Indeed it is. As the Council report points out, the charter has been revised only three times in sixty-five years, including in 1965, when the Security Council was expanded from eleven to fifteen members by adding four non-permanent, rotating seats.

Any motion to expand the Security Council requires amending the United Nations Charter which, according to Article 108 of the Charter, requires the support of at least two-thirds of the General Assembly. This means 129 of the 193 member states represented in the General Assembly must first approve any reconfiguration of the Security Council. The amendment in question then has to be ratified by two-thirds of UN members, including all five permanent Security Council members, "in accordance with their respective constitutional processes." In other words, the principal legislative body of each member state, not just the ruling government or administration, must agree to the proposed amendment. The U.S. Senate, for instance, would have to approve any such amendment by a two-thirds majority vote before it can be ratified. Clearly bipartisan backing would be required. It's not hard to see, then, why reforming the Security Council could prove difficult.

Beyond the procedural requirements, navigating the politics of various Security Council reform proposals has also proved extraordinarily difficult since the issue of enlargement first appeared on the UN General Assembly agenda over three decades ago, in 1979.

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Security Council, the Commission on Human Rights, and the peacekeepers in the field. Each is in dire need of reform or rescue.”

Regarding the council, she offered this blunt assessment: “Permanent membership on the Security Council is woefully anachronistic...The permanent five members once spoke for close to 40 percent of the world’s population. They now account for 29 percent. The world’s largest democracy (India) is excluded; so are regional powerhouses such as Nigeria and Brazil, not to mention the entire Islamic world.”

In sum, Power warned in her article: “Without major changes, the United Nations may well buckle under (its) growing strain...believing that the status quo will suffice is dangerous.”

Time to Reconsider Option 4?

On his November 2010 visit to India during his first term, President Obama spoke to the issue of UN Security Council reform and the role India should play:

“The just and sustainable international order that America seeks includes a United Nations that is efficient, effective, credible, and legitimate. That is why I can say today, in the years ahead, I look forward to a reformed UN Security Council that includes India as a permanent member.”

While the president’s endorsement of India was greatly welcomed in New Delhi, his reference to “in the years ahead” did not suggest that the United States was going to harness its “good offices” in New York or capitals around the world to press the case for Security Council reform and expansion. That would be consistent with past administrations.

For example, in 2007, then-U.S. ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad cabled the State Department: “A serious debate has begun on Council expansion. Therefore we believe it is time to seriously consider our response.” He went on to list four options for the U.S. government to consider, with Option 1 being “avoid engagement and rely on our veto in the ratification phase to preserve our interests.” At the other end of the spectrum, he articulated Option 4: “proactively articulate an American position and mobilize a coalition to support it.”

While a formal proposal for expansion was not put to a vote in 2007, steps were taken by proponents that make it more likely that such a vote could be a real possibility. Hence many believe the time is right for the United States to again consider Option 4.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN undersecretary general and today an Indian minister of state, would be one of them. He has been arguing for some time that U.S. leadership is critical:

“As with most global issues, the key to breaking the logjam lies in Washington. Most of the naysayers are U.S. allies who have been given a free hand by Washington’s own lack of enthusiasm for reform. If a new U.S. administration could be persuaded that it is in America’s self-interest to maintain a revitalized United Nations...Washington could bring enough countries in its wake to transform the debate.”

Major players have included the group of G4 nations – India, Germany, Brazil, and Japan—all leading candidates for permanent Security Council membership. Another group, the “Uniting for Consensus” coalition which includes Pakistan, Italy, Argentina, and Mexico, among other countries, opposes an increase in the number of permanent seats but supports the idea of an enlarged 25-member council that includes an additional 10 non-permanent members. Meanwhile, the bloc of African nations has called for two permanent, veto-wielding seats for Africa. Most recently, the Caribbean Community has put forward a plan envisioning a council of 11 permanent members with veto and 16 non-permanent members. To date, none of these competing proposals have been able to garner the support needed to amend the UN Charter.

That said, there is no question this effort will continue and many are convinced, like Shashi Tharoor, that one day it will succeed: “This is fair warning that additional seats and additional table space will soon be needed. The Horseshoe’s Table’s days are numbered. We will soon need a new, more democratic, and representative Round Table.”

-Karl Inderfurth and Samir Nair

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Of course, India will make its own case for permanent membership (as will the other leading aspirants), but on one particular issue it could play a very important role, namely making it clear where it stands on what some have described as “the thorniest issue in a thicket of thorns”—whether new permanent members will insist upon the right to veto. Chinmaya Gharekhan, a former Indian ambassador to the UN and author of *The Horseshoe Table: An inside view of the UN Security Council*, has this advice: “While it would be wonderful to have the right to veto, it is simply not going to happen. Permanent membership without veto, if and when it happens, will be of immense importance to us.”

Power before the SFRC

On July 17, at her confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Ambassador Power was asked her view of expanding permanent seats on the Security Council. She replied: “Any expansion should be one that both increases the representativeness of the council, but also ensures the effectiveness of the council.” She added: “We do oppose, of course, giving up the veto.”

Effectiveness and representativeness are two of the critical factors to take into account in expanding the UN Security Council. The former should also encompass efficiency; the latter, credibility and legitimacy. These will be challenging to achieve. But just as the United States provided creative and farsighted leadership at the founding of the United Nations, it should not be beyond its reach to provide similar leadership at this time when fundamental reform of the institution is clearly needed. .

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