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Op-Ed Contributor

Give the United Nations a Little Competition

By RUTH WEDGWOOD

KOFI ANNAN's term as secretary general of the United Nations has one year to go, and so far he has been unable to deliver on any real institutional reform.

Paradoxically, it is a "high outside" pitch that could be the most promising route to reform - recognizing the virtues of outside competition. Monopoly can be corrosive for any institution, and many of the problems addressed by the United Nations can be and have been handled in other forums. Washington and Turtle Bay would both be aided by recognizing the virtues of "competitive multilateralism."

Even after the exposure of corruption in the oil-for-food program, criminal investigations of the procurement process, reports by a "high-level panel" and a bipartisan commission, and a summit meeting of heads of state, there still seems to be no momentum for change at the United Nations. Mr. Annan has simply not swayed the General Assembly with his public pronouncement that "good management is in the interests of everyone."

The urgency of United Nations reform is easy to diagnose. When resources are scarce for peacekeeping, health and development, it is deadly to keep spinning gold into hay on redundant jobs and expired mandates. Effective use of funds requires transparency and integrity - and becomes nearly impossible when there is a short-staffed inspector general who cannot disclose reports to member states. The organization's important work in human rights becomes satiric when its human rights commission includes gross abusers like Cuba and Zimbabwe.

Smug reliance on an aging brand name is a real danger in any organization; this is no less true for the United Nations than for corporate behemoths like General Motors. "We are acting for the world community," is the mantra in Turtle Bay, "so we must be O.K." At one time that might have been enough. But it is no longer 1945. There are countless regional and transnational organizations that set standards, send peacekeepers and monitor human rights.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of American States and the African Union all post standards for democratic militaries and human rights. NATO and groups like the Economic Community of West African States supply peacekeepers. Standards are set by international trade and professional associations and independent economic groups like the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision.

A resort to outside competition is made necessary by the sclerosis of reform inside the United

Nations. The place is micro-managed by a General Assembly that is reluctant to change the status quo. Delegating more power to the Secretary General would allow an institutional flexibility that can adapt to changing events. But some voices in the developing world have championed a tactic of control by inefficiency as a way to block the influence of larger members, without seeing that it frustrates the work of the United Nations in their own regions.

The United States and Japan may seek to delay the biennial budget. But even if that leads to some short-term changes, in the end the General Assembly will still control the inside rules on perpetual mandates, patronage, document retention and transparency. And unless the Europeans are solidly on board, American proposals for reform will be defeated.

The politics of reform are constrained by the regional solipsism that developed over the organization's first 50 years. During the cold war, the Soviet Union solicited members of the Non-Aligned Movement, an official United Nations caucus, to rally support for its positions against the West. Fidel Castro's Cuba lives on, and still gains influence by wrapping its dictatorship in a cloak of Southern solidarity. American diplomats cannot attend the political discussions of the 115-member group.

The other major caucus of developing nations, the Group of 77, also meets in private to determine positions. Now tipping the scales with 132 countries, the G-77 can pass or block a measure in the General Assembly entirely on its own. America has friends in both groups, but they often fear breaking with a caucus position lest they lose support on local issues.

So the situation seems intractable. But that's no reason to sit on the sidelines and lament, year after year, our inability to improve things. If the United Nations can't reform on its own, America needs to support other multilateral venues. In fact, our seeking parallel paths to international intervention can help the United Nations as well.

As the economist Albert O. Hirschman once observed, "exit" and "voice" are in delicate balance in any successful organization. If threats to exit are casually employed, it drains away impetus to seek internal reform. But if things can't be changed from within, members may need to vote with their feet, one issue at a time.

The idea of competitive multilateralism avoids the stark choice of going alone or going to the United Nations. America must still support the purposes of the United Nations; it is a historic alliance, a product of World War II, and remains the only all-inclusive political organization around. America enjoys prerogatives as a permanent Security Council member that would be hard to gain again. But we do have some flexibility in how we choose to approach international cooperation.

The United Nations' specialized programs depend on voluntary financing from member states, and we should direct our money to those that are cost-effective. We can also give funds directly to private relief organizations that show initiative, without a bypass through United Nations middle-management. Relief organizations in newly freed East Timor, for example, were hard put to work around a slow-footed United Nations administrative process.

On issues where the global organization is impotent or counterproductive, we can make progress through regional organizations and informal coalitions. We can give greater support to regional human rights groups, instead of seeking consensus with political thugs at the Human Rights Commission. We can act in international crises through the Community of Democracies and NATO.

We can negotiate treaties in various forums. The Cybercrime Convention was negotiated through the Council of Europe, with the United States and other high-tech nations as added participants. Likewise, the Proliferation Security Initiative, begun by the United States and 10 other countries in 2003, has been successful in countering shipments of weapons of mass destruction despite not having a formal treaty structure.

In the Internet age, there is no single venue for cooperation. This is true for politics and business alike. The United Nations may gain a second wind and a youthful gait if it discovers that it has some real competition.

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