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THE UN IN THE 21ST CENTURY: SECURITY COUNCIL REFORM

Kenzo Oshima

- UN Member States must not relent in their efforts for UN reform, particularly of the Security Council, if the Organization is to remain an effective, relevant world body to address key global issues and challenges.
- The Group-of-Four campaigns of 2005 have left useful lessons, while ideas and proposals put forward ever since for a compromise solution deserve close attention.
- As a leading player, Japan will need to be more flexible regarding fresh proposals and ideas.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

The United Nations, now past 70 years old, stands at a crossroads. The UN's track record over the past decades is mixed, or spotty, at best. One may criticize or feel exasperated about the UN's impotence or ineffectiveness, but few would favor dismantling this world body, the sole legitimate universal system for bringing nations together. The only constructive approach is to do our best to reform it where needed and feasible to enable it to perform better, respond more effectively to problems and challenges posed by the fast-globalizing world, and fulfill the expectations of the international community.

The latest landmark document for comprehensive UN reform is the "Outcome Document", adopted at the 2005 World Summit marking the Organization's 60th anniversary. It called for reform of the Secretariat, and review of mandates originating from past resolutions of the General Assembly and other chief UN organs. It also proposed the establishment of new institutions such as a "Human Rights Council" and a "Peacebuilding Commission", and introduced new concepts such as "Responsibility to Protect" and "Human Security". Also addressed were changes needed to enhance systemwide coherence in dealing with development, humanitarian issues, the environment, and other topics that cut across all divisions of the Organization. What matters, of course, is their implementation.

When it comes to UN reform, the Security Council is undoubtedly the body where the need for reform has been most frequently and strongly articulated. Pertinent questions have long been raised about the basis of the Council's legitimacy: given the considerable increase in UN membership, the time is long overdue to improve its representational fairness; shifts in the global power balance since 1945 should be appropriately reflected in a renewed Council composition; the veto power of the permanent members is anachronistic, its abuse often detrimental to the general interest, and it should be abolished or its use limited, and so on.

To emphasize the point, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan used to declare that no reform of the United Nations would be complete without reform of the Security Council.

However, the Member States have not been able to move ahead on Council reform, even though from time to time significant momentum has been generated. In 1997, for example, the President of the General Assembly, Tan Sri Razali, came close to pushing through an Assembly resolution. Early in the 21st century, the “High-Level Panel on Security Threats, Challenges and Changes” came up with two specific options regarding Council membership changes: an expansion with new permanent members without veto power (Model A), or an expansion with the addition of only non-permanent members (Model B). This was followed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s report (“A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility”, 2004), incorporating these options and inviting Member States to engage in discussions to reach a solution.


Against such a background, the four aspirant countries – Japan, India, Brazil and Germany – formed a coalition (G-4) and launched an intensive campaign in 2004-05 to move the agenda of Council reform and membership expansion forward. The G-4 followed the Model A approach in essence, proposing an expansion by adding six new permanent members and four non-permanent members. The G-4’s initiatives started to generate a strong momentum and came to cause alarm among some Member States, especially several middle power countries that opposed the G-4 approach (“Coffee Club”). They intensified their counter-action by presenting their own draft resolution based on Model B. Among the permanent members, China and the US joined the campaign against the G-4. The Africa group – the largest group in the UN membership – also presented its own draft following Model A, while also demanding veto power for the new permanent members.

In the ensuing efforts to come up with a united front, the G-4 and the Africa group reached a provisional agreement on a compromise formula. This, however, turned out to be a non-starter later on when, at an African summit meeting held in early August 2005, no formal endorsement of the provisional agreement proved possible. Thus, the G-4’s draft resolution came to an end without a vote in the General Assembly.

In the aftermath of this failed attempt, debates have continued to keep the momentum alive, including through a new forum in the General Assembly –

“Intergovernmental Negotiations” (ING) – but no significant development seems in sight, creating an apparent stalemate up to the present.

Ideas for a compromise solution have emerged to break out of this deadlock. One of them is a set of Council reform proposals presented, in early 2015, by a group of international eminent persons who call themselves “The Elders”, with the late Nelson Mandela as its founder and currently chaired by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. It floated the idea of a new category of members with a much longer term than two years, and re-electable – in other words, a “semi-permanent” or “de facto permanent” member category.

Japan is deeply committed to playing a constructive role in the United Nations, and over the past six decades it has made every effort, financially or otherwise, to contribute to this end. Japan’s aspiration to a permanent seat in the Security Council, and its drive for Council reform, is backed by this commitment to the UN’s ideals and purposes. Given the prevailing realities, however, more creative approaches and tactics may be in order for Japan, a leading player, to facilitate a broadly acceptable compromise. 

Kenzo Oshima is a retired Japanese diplomat. He is the former Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations and the former United Nations Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.