Trump Can Advance UN Reform in the Wake of Obama's Anti-Israel Stunt

January 4, 2017

By [Tom Basile](http://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbasile/)

Forbes

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbasile/2017/01/04/trump-can-advance-un-reform-in-the-wake-of-obamas-anti-israel-stunt/#2095d7816344>

With the Obama Administration’s parting slap at Israel in the United Nations Security Council, calls for de-funding the world body in retaliation have again jumped to page one.  The anti-Israel resolution in the waning days of the administration was the capstone of the 44th President’s unbending love affair with the UN, but he may have unwittingly created a fertile environment for President Trump to advance long-needed United Nations reform.

For Obama, the UN was a place where he swaggered, standing above and apart from the ‘Lilliputians’ of the global community like some great historic figure ready to help heal the ills of the planet with high-minded rhetoric and immeasurable charm.  Enemies thought him naïve and weak. Friends didn’t trust him.  Everyone else just tried to squeeze what they could out of the relationship.

To put it mildly, President Trump vows a different posture towards Israel and the UN.  Tough love is needed in New York and Trump is well-positioned to lead a new effort to make the UN more effective, more transparent and more cost efficient.  Thanks to Obama’s go-along to get-along policy with the United Nations and the outrage at his use of the Security Council to retaliate against Israel, he leaves President Trump with perhaps the best opportunity for UN reform any President has had in decades.

Simply cutting off the UN from American donor dollars, as some have suggested, might be gratifying but the more constructive goal would be to rally the nations that supply the UN with the lion’s share of its resources and promote a serious reform program tying those resources to long-overdue systemic changes.

The UN was created by nation-states and it needs to be responsive to nation-states.  The longstanding dynamic in Turtle Bay has seen the Secretariat and the bureaucracy behaving as though the nation-states were responsive to the organization rather than the other way around.  It’s just another way the UN, for all its potential and value, has failed to provide the world’s citizens with a strong confidence in the efficacy and honesty of its institutions.

Presently the taxpayers of the United States pay more than $7 billion to the UN through a combination of an annual, mandatory assessment based on a percentage of GDP and other contributions.  It’s not unreasonable to ask what we’re getting for our investment and demand greater accountability.

Right now if you’re the United States, being in the UN is like going to a restaurant and ordering wine.  When you get the bill, you’re charged $1000 for the bottle, but you 1. Never saw the bottle so you can’t verify you drank what you ordered; 2. You didn’t really like the wine; and 3. It turns out you’re also footing the bill for virtually everyone else in the restaurant.

Much like his campaign to upend the Republican establishment, Trump’s United Nations reform program must be undertaken from the outside-in rather from the inside-out. The Secretariat’s intimate involvement in the process of reform along with the inclusion in those efforts of blocs of nations that provide little to no funding for the world body has long stymied substantive efforts and ensured the status quo.

To be sure, the UN Secretariat is not an executive branch with the member states serving as co-equal legislators.  The Secretariat is there to serve as a facilitator of the agenda of the global community expressed by the UN’s members through its various organs.

It is precisely for this reason that the discussion on UN reform in the Trump era, which has long been debated in New York, should move beyond the walls of the UN to the national parliaments and heads of state and government who appropriate the organization’s funds to begin with.  A coalition of just the United States, Brazil, Canada, the UK (now divorced from the EU) Australia, and Japan, would represent more than 40% of the total annual assessment, keeping in mind that 135 of the UN’s 193 member states pay less than .1% of the budget each.

Taking the push for reform to the very source of the funding and tying those funds to a reform agenda could at long last force acquiescence of the Secretariat and real action within the world body.

Additional transparency and reforms to peacekeeping operations generally have been debated for decades as well but little progress has been made. Consider that when it comes to the UN’s peacekeeping efforts, just combining the shares of the United States (28.57%), Japan (9.68%), Italy (3.75%), Canada (2.92%), the United Kingdom (5.80%) and Australia (2.33%) accounts for more than 50% of the total budget.

The latest scandal involving peacekeeping operations boiled over just last year with Human Rights Watch calling on the UN to “show leadership in ending sexual exploitation and abuse throughout its system, from headquarters in New York to field missions in conflict areas.”

Much like his campaign to upend the Republican establishment, Trump’s United Nations reform program must be undertaken from the outside-in rather from the inside-out. The Secretariat’s intimate involvement in the process of reform along with the inclusion in those efforts of blocs of nations that provide little to no funding for the world body has long stymied substantive efforts and ensured the status quo.

To be sure, the UN Secretariat is not an executive branch with the member states serving as co-equal legislators.  The Secretariat is there to serve as a facilitator of the agenda of the global community expressed by the UN’s members through its various organs.

It is precisely for this reason that the discussion on UN reform in the Trump era, which has long been debated in New York, should move beyond the walls of the UN to the national parliaments and heads of state and government who appropriate the organization’s funds to begin with.  A coalition of just the United States, Brazil, Canada, the UK (now divorced from the EU) Australia, and Japan, would represent more than 40% of the total annual assessment, keeping in mind that 135 of the UN’s 193 member states pay less than .1% of the budget each.

Taking the push for reform to the very source of the funding and tying those funds to a reform agenda could at long last force acquiescence of the Secretariat and real action within the world body.

Additional transparency and reforms to peacekeeping operations generally have been debated for decades as well but little progress has been made. Consider that when it comes to the UN’s peacekeeping efforts, just combining the shares of the United States (28.57%), Japan (9.68%), Italy (3.75%), Canada (2.92%), the United Kingdom (5.80%) and Australia (2.33%) accounts for more than 50% of the total budget.

The latest scandal involving peacekeeping operations boiled over just last year with Human Rights Watch calling on the UN to “show leadership in ending sexual exploitation and abuse throughout its system, from headquarters in New York to field missions in conflict areas.”

There is a crisis of confidence when it comes to the UN to be sure.  The now decade-old Volcker report that blew the lid off of the Oil for Food scandal still tarnishes the UN brand, particularly here in the United States.  The phony Human Rights Council chaired by the likes of Iran and failures to stop mass murder in Darfur, Rwanda, and Bosnia only buttress the perception that the UN is either corrupt, impotent or an elite diplomatic chattering class.

The UN’s Procurement Task Force, created in 2006 found more than $630 million in fraud, waste and abuse in the UN’s contracting process.  The UN eliminated the organization in 2008 and there has been little in the way of additional work to root out corruption since.

With a General Assembly and other UN organs increasingly dominated by developing countries that provide little financial support, a flaccid European Union, an increasingly aggressive Russia and China, and a powerful Secretariat, the United States and many other large donor nations have little leverage left to force change.

With the new Trump administration promising a new posture, the time may be ripe for driving for a system of voluntary contributions or a modification to the assessment regime.  It’s high time we saw increases in transparency and greater reliance on credible performance metrics to truly evaluate whether taxpayer and private donor resources are being utilized effectively.

Reform at the UN will require toughness on the part of the new President and Congress.  It will require tenacity and the willingness to be creative in our leadership of the effort.

The UN continues to have value for the world community, despite the mission creep that has moved it far off of the mark from its lofty origins of promoting international peace and security.  Numerous humanitarian programs, and fostering constructive international dialogue on a range of issues from women’s rights to human health and the environment are making a difference in the lives of many in need.

That’s why a UN that can be trusted by the international community to expend donor dollars wisely and fairly is a laudable goal that requires U.S. leadership.  If Trump plays public opinion right, he can leverage President Obama’s public disdain for Israel to build a bridge to other allies and demonstrate his support for the long-term future of the UN.