It's time for serious United Nations reform

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Francis Rooney

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As a former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, I have worked with a uniquely non-hegemonic sovereign that utilizes moral persuasion and "soft power" diplomacy to combat crises around the world. Whether Islamic-inspired terrorism, medical epidemics, corrupt regimes, or human rights violations, this form of diplomacy can produce positive outcomes and avoid armed conflict.

And this is why the unaccountable and underperforming United Nations needs serious reform.

The U.N. is failing its mission to make the world a better and safer place, and it continues to lose credibility. It legitimizes corrupt, destabilizing regimes that violate the human rights of their citizens, it lacks accountability, and it wastes a lot of money. As the 2017 General Assembly session opens in New York, we face numerous security and humanitarian challenges around the world. Now is the time for the U.S. to demand fundamental, broad reforms to the underperforming U.N.

The worst offender in the organization is the United Nations Human Rights Council. While claiming to champion human rights, the UNHRC allows notorious human rights abusers and authoritarian regimes to serve as members and affords them a legitimacy of sorts that runs counter to its mission.

Venezuela, China, and Cuba are among the worst human rights violators of the 47 council members. How can an organization supposedly devoted to human rights allow Venezuela membership while Nicolas Maduro is dismantling his nation's democratic government and waging war on his people? Furthermore, the UNHRC has a noticeable anti-Israel bias, passing a myriad of resolutions against this one country while barely condemning serious human rights violations by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The UNHRC is not the only U.N.-affiliated agency that nurtures dictatorships. Earlier this year, the World Intellectual Property Organization facilitated a patent application for North Korea to produce a dangerous chemical agent, sodium cyanide, that can be used to make nerve gas. Incredibly, this was accomplished without consulting the U.N. General Assembly and without regard to sanctions issued by the U.N. against the regime of Kim Jong Un. Worst of all, in supporting the application, WIPO ignored serious concerns of other U.N. agencies.

The U.N. has also demonstrated a significant failure of internal financial control and stewardship over its assets. A 2008 audit of the U.N.'s peacekeeping mission to Sudan found that tens of millions of dollars had been wasted, including spoiled food rations and payment for unused warehouses and hotel rooms. In 2010, half of the UN's food aid to Somalia was stolen. In 2014 an audit estimated that $100 million in food aid was pilfered by al-Shabaab, a terrorist organization.

Making matters worse, the UN disbanded its anti-corruption procurement taskforce the year prior, hampering its investigative ability. This, year leaked internal documents from the World Health Organization revealed that the U.N.-affiliated organization spends about $200 million a year on travel, which is more than it spends fighting AIDS, hepatitis, malaria, and tuberculosis combined. Compare this to Doctors Without Borders, which spends less than a quarter of what WHO does on travel while employing over five times the number of staff.

Additionally, too many U.N. peacekeeping missions go awry. One sickening example is the report of widespread sexual abuse by U.N. peacekeepers serving in the Central African Republic. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon is a peacekeeping failure. One of its mandates is to aid the Lebanese government in restoring order to southern Lebanon, an area inundated with Hezbollah fighters. This mission has been proven wholly ineffective in dealing with the terrorists, and turns a blind eye to Hezbollah's destabilizing activities in the region.

These examples illustrate the need for serious reforms to the underperforming U.N. For far too long, the U.S. has ignored these problems. We are the largest financial contributor to the organization, supplying 22 percent of the U.N.'s overall budget and 28 percent of its peacekeeping budget. If the U.N. is the world's stage, we are its biggest player, and we have the leverage to demand significant reforms to the ineffective bureaucracy. It is certainly the right thing to do for the American taxpayer.

First, Washington must demand that the UN and its agencies no longer legitimize corrupt dictators, and that the UNHRC reorganize itself to align with and execute on its human rights mission. Governments like Maduro's regime have no place on the UNHRC.

Second, affiliate and subsidiary agencies must be held accountable for what they do and spend. Active, measurable accountability would increase the U.N.'s credibility and effectiveness.

Third, the U.N. must oversee and monitor the effectiveness of peacekeeping forces to make sure they remain relevant and effective. When the circumstances which justify a mission change, the value of the mission must be re-evaluated.

If the U.N. cannot quickly improve its legitimacy and effectiveness, the U.S. should reconsider the manner in which it funds and participates in the organization. President Trump has expressed his opinion of the need for U.N. reform, and his administration has reduced the U.N.'s peacekeeping budget and has begun to apply pressure on the UNHRC. It is my hope that both Trump and U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley will continue to aggressively lead a transformation in the U.N.