Independent Report - Group of External Advisors to the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations

About the Team

The Team of External Advisors (henceforward “the Team”) was formed at the initiative of the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, as a pro bono group of 16 globally respected personalities dedicated to multilateralism, who have been of service both to their countries and in the international arena.

The purpose of this Team was to provide counsel to the President of the General Assembly on how best to advance his priorities for the 72nd session. Throughout the presidency, it was used to discuss and share views on strategic questions, including the scope and depth of United Nations engagement as well as the role of the General Assembly.

As the theme for the 72nd session of the United Nations General Assembly was “Focusing on people: striving for peace and a decent life for all on a sustainable planet”, the Team focused on peace, conflict prevention and mediation. In addition, it discussed global political issues, multilateralism, sustaining peace, implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals; Paris Agreement on Climate Change, human rights and human dignity and the future and reform of the United Nations.

During the 72nd session, the Team met in person on several occasions and exchanged frequent communication as well as held a number of smaller meetings.

Introduction

Throughout discussions, there was a widespread recognition that the international landscape is experiencing a moment of geopolitical transformation. In this context, there were frequent references to the notion of multipolarity, even if it remains unclear whether the new realities will contribute to the strengthening of multilateralism and reduce scope for unilateralism. Conflict and instability continue to defy efforts carried out by the United Nations to promote peace and prevent war. Even as the concepts of Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace are brought to the center of the discussions on international peace and security, progress in achieving stability remains elusive and uneven. At the same time, the importance ascribed by governments to the United Nations General Assembly during the high-level week in 2017 can be seen as a manifestation in favor of enhanced international cooperation in times of geopolitical change.
The role of the United Nations in a changing geopolitical environment has become itself a matter for debate. Notwithstanding the challenges of the present, there is ample support for preserving the essential mandate of the Organization through a reaffirmation of the relevance of the Charter. Discussions on how best to reform the Organization, so as to modernize its modus operandi and eliminate inefficiencies, are bound to continue in the coming sessions of the General Assembly. For these efforts to yield the desired results it will be necessary for those who are most committed to multilateralism - who represent the vast majority of the international community - to raise their voices and exercise their leadership, within and outside United Nations debates. The Team clearly placed itself within this perspective as agents of both preservation and change.

The Current Status of Multilateralism

Participants examined the current status of multilateralism as reflected in the activities of the United Nations, with a focus on the work of the General Assembly. A sense that multilateralism may be under threat was expressed by many. As the post-Cold War period evolves into a new geopolitical dynamic with deep structural changes, it seems that the sustainability of the rules-based international order can no longer be taken for granted. Ongoing debates reveal a dwindling disposition towards genuine dialogue, particularly in the realm of peace and security. Decisions are often the product of non-inclusive processes, behind closed doors.

Multilateralism can thrive in a more multipolar geopolitical landscape. However, a new configuration in the distribution of power will not automatically translate into enhanced international cooperation to tackle existing or new challenges. A transition period fraught with uncertainty and risks, during which the United Nations will be tested, appears to be in store. It was suggested, in this regard, that a high-level manifestation of support for and commitment to the lasting relevance of the United Nations Charter at a time of change, would contribute to place multilateralism at the service of a peaceful and cooperative geopolitical transition, maximizing opportunity and minimizing risk. In this respect, while the leadership of the economically and militarily more powerful remains central, there is wide scope for nations of every dimension and level of development to lead and inspire, individually and in coalitions. Significant segments of public opinion in both developed and developing societies remain broadly supportive of the United Nations. In this sense, all those who see value in the United Nations system should seek ways to work together.

It is clear that erosion of respect for the rules embodied in the UN Charter, at a time of persisting security risks, can have profoundly destabilizing consequences for world peace and the future of international cooperation. Particular importance resides, in this
context, in the rules governing the use of force, enshrined in Chapter VII of the Charter.  
To reassert the credibility of the organization the senior officials of the United Nations  
should actively pursue its goals, especially on conflict resolution and sustaining Peace.  
Of equal importance are the multilateral platforms for handling global public goods. The  
Sustainable Development Agenda deserves to be valued as a fundamental  
contribution by the UN to engage the international community in the promotion of  
shared goals to confront economic, social and environmental challenges. Climate  
change cannot be tackled singlehandedly or by groups of the like-minded, and  
illustrates how the specificity of contemporary challenges require a strong multilateral  
system.

The reforms proposed by the Secretary-General represent a readiness on the part of  
the Secretariat to better allocate resources and improve the overall efficiency of the  
system. Bearing in mind the abundant resources destined to rising military budgets, the  
view was expressed that those with a stake in multilateralism should demonstrate a  
renewed budgetary commitment oriented towards the promotion of peace and  
sustainable development. If inclusive multilateralism is to remain the preferred  
diplomatic instrument for international cooperation in the 21st Century, enlightened  
leadership will have to be forthcoming from governments and individuals.

Peace and Prevention

The President of the General Assembly presented an initial set of considerations with  
emphasis on the multiplicity of local conflicts that have become particularly intractable  
due to difficulties in reaching understandings within the Security Council on the most  
appropriate strategies to promote stability and reconciliation. Advisors were informed  
on the High Level event on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, including examples  
shared by member States on lessons learned. Participants in the Team provided several  
analytical insights regarding the prevention of conflict and suggested ways in which UN  
performance may be improved.

There was agreement that prevention has become a priority in the current international  
environment in order to confront local, regional or global tensions as well as to deal  
more effectively with conflicts that have already broken out. The threat posed by  
terrorism was perceived as a cross-cutting contemporary issue, which cannot be  
dissociated from grievances arising from unresolved situations, particularly in the  
Middle East. It was suggested that the General Assembly is well equipped to tackle  
structural root causes, such as access to water resources or other environmental  
challenges, while the Security Council is the appropriate organ to deal with the  
immediate circumstances that lead to armed conflict. It was also suggested that not
only is it necessary to acquire a better understanding of the structural and contingent roots of conflict, but that the roots of peace also deserve to be more carefully studied and understood, in order to discourage bellicosity domestically and across borders.

The primary role of national players in addressing a rise in tensions was underlined. In this context it was suggested that the advice and good offices or personalities from the realm of academia, spiritual leaders and women activists, among others, should be tapped into. The UN Secretary-General’s engagement or that of honest brokers from third parties was also emphasized. The view was expressed that the role of Regional Organizations has been insufficiently taken into consideration. Examples were provided of negative outcomes that were the product of strategies and interventions devised without due regard to the views of neighbors or regional actors. Counter-examples were given of how regional organizations can effectively defuse tensions before they spin out of control. It was also recalled that tensions can be trans-regional, or involve extra-regional powers, in which cases the role of the Security Council remains crucial.

At the same time, it was recognized that difficulties in communication may arise between local actors and mediators. The diplomatic quality of mediation efforts thus acquires vital importance. There was wide agreement that diplomacy, whether governmental or non-governmental, should be the preferred method for resolving disputes. A surge in diplomacy, as suggested by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, is amply seen as an urgent necessity. Eloquent pleas were made in favor of a revitalized commitment to diplomacy regionally and globally. «Low key» and «under the radar» diplomacy was perceived as providing an especially useful path. Just as discretion contributes to building confidence in situations of rising antagonism, the inadvertent or deliberate involvement of the media tends to work in the opposite direction.

In parallel, it was felt that the international community has yet to reach a correct understanding of the circumstances in which the use of force can be contemplated as a rational alternative for improving prospects for peace and those situations in which military intervention will fail to resolve a conflict or, more dramatically, make matters worse or spread conflict. The Peace Building Commission, created simultaneously by resolutions adopted by consensus by the General Assembly and the Security Council, can help to better define the spheres in which either may enjoy a comparative advantage both as regards prevention and sustaining peace.

It was recalled that there are coercive measures short of military intervention that can be resorted to as part of diplomatic strategies for preventing conflict, such as targeted sanctions and arms embargoes. Ideas were also provided on how to reaffirm the provisions of the Charter and key principles of the organization with a view towards
strengthening respect for international law. Reference to the possibilities offered by the International Criminal Court was also made as an element in the promotion of durable peace.

In the face of rising frustration with the Security Council’s inability to provide effective orientation towards the resolution of conflicts it was felt that its reform became an urgent matter. Simultaneously it was suggested that the Uniting for Peace Resolution remains a valid option at the disposal of member States, allowing for the General Assembly to assume greater responsibilities in the promotion of peace and security in the face of Security Council paralysis.

**The Work of the General Assembly**

As the universal principal organ in the United Nations system, the General Assembly can be considered a unique and formidable world parliament. There is simply no other forum that can rival the General Assembly in terms of its representativeness and scope of mandate. At the same time, with more than three hundred resolutions being approved annually by the General Assembly, there is a widespread sense that the General Assembly could focus more efficiently on its broad agenda. Indeed, fears were expressed to the effect that the General Assembly may be losing relevance at a moment in History when the demand for coordinated global responses to common challenges is increasing. Examples of such challenges include the fight against climate change, rising inequality, scarcity of water resources.

The role of the General Assembly and its President has undergone important changes in the past ten years or so. It is recognized that there are various ways in which the President of the General Assembly can exercise leadership and influence its work. Interactive thematic debates and opportunities for civil society to express their views are some of the GA’s new features. The Team of External Advisors itself may be cited as a new experiment.

The normative role of the General Assembly has produced noteworthy results in the field of sustainable development, with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. Initiatives on topics such as nuclear disarmament and migration have translated into groundbreaking texts. Consensus has been reached on more transparent procedures for the selection of the UN Secretary-General.

A noteworthy failure of the General Assembly has been its inability to produce a negotiated text for decision by member States on Security Council reform. In spite of efforts by successive PGA’s, the General Assembly continues to grapple with the issue after more than two decades of discussions. Independently of an examination of the
possible reasons for this persistent impasse, it was noted that the General Assembly should not shy away from assuming innovative approaches to international security and disarmament, thereby helping to compensate for the perceived inadequacies of a Security Council, viewed by many as lacking in representativeness and effectiveness.

According to some, the General Assembly may be facing growing difficulties in fulfilling a normative role, as citizens in different parts of the world assume anti-establishment views and manifest skepticism with respect to globalization and supra-national governance. Others point out that the work of the United Nations remains undervalued and insufficiently understood by most societies, requiring media campaigns capable of better informing public opinion. The view was expressed that the Agenda of the General Assembly is too broad and should not be further expanded. It was suggested that a mechanism to follow-up on resolutions would be desirable, in order to verify the usefulness of certain decisions.

The latitude for creativity in the General Assembly was contrasted with the more limited flexibility of the Security Council in setting priorities and establishing objectives. It was proposed that the General Assembly could help to promote greater interaction among governments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations. Other suggestions related to extending the tenure of the President of the General Assembly to a two-year period and establishing a «troika» of past Presidents as an informal consultative mechanism. Regular meetings and close cooperation between the Secretary General and the President of the General Assembly were recommended.

21st Century Security Council - Role and Reform

The effectiveness of the United Nations as a whole is often judged by the performance of the Security Council. To the extent that the Council is viewed as ineffective, the credibility of the entire system is negatively impacted. A consensus has existed for over two decades that the current composition of the Security Council is out of date. The question of equitable representation in this principal organ is directly linked to the core issue of its legitimacy. In addition to the question of the expansion of the Council’s membership, the reform process should include a serious qualitative assessment of whether it is adequately equipped to handle contemporary challenges in the field of peace and security. It is felt by many that a more incisive narrative needs to be devised to establish clearly to a wider public the importance of updating the Security Council’s composition and methods of work.
As the tectonic plates of world geopolitics continue to move and affect the post-World War II structures for international cooperation, the United Nations runs the risk of being overtaken by other, less inclusive, instances of coordination if it does not rise to the challenge of reform in the crucial area of peace and security governance. The risks for world peace are enormous. Notwithstanding the urgency of the matter, a genuine sense of collective responsibility capable of translating itself into a negotiating process that will lead to tangible results has yet to emerge.

At the same time, the point was made that there are several ways in which the United Nations system can become more operative in the promotion of peace and security, even in the absence of Security Council reform. The elected members of the Council can enhance their role in a variety of ways, including by reaching out more systematically to their respective regions through regular consultations. Council members should not only concern themselves with strategies to defeat belligerence but also stand firm against unilateral initiatives detrimental to peace and the credibility of the system. If resort to the veto by the permanent members is perceived as arbitrary and unjustified, elected members and the membership of the UN as a whole should not remain passive. Elected members can work more closely together to influence outcomes and shape strategies. Through the «Uniting for Peace» mechanism the General Assembly can assume a more visible role in the face of deadlock or negligence by the Council.

Participants agreed that the intergovernmental process expected to produce a reform plan has brought very little progress so far. Explanations abound for why this process remains stalled. The fact that ratification by the five permanent members is an essential requirement for an amendment to the Charter to come into effect places special responsibility on the P5. Notwithstanding their in-built leadership role, the predominant perception is that their current attitude ranges from ascribing a low priority to the process to actively seeking to prevent change.

Two Pressing Global Issues: Migration and Financing for Development

Migration

Migration will remain a reality for the foreseeable future. Migration is not a new phenomenon, nor is it predominantly south to north - there is migration in many directions. The challenge is global. International discussions on migration must take into account, in a balanced way, the rights of the migrant and those of the host country. In the case of refugees, recipient countries have certain obligations under international law, in particular the «non-refoulement» rule enshrined in the 1951 Convention. Beyond the distinction between refugees and migrants, there are relevant aspects that merit specific consideration within the migrant population itself, including
the situation of children, gender issues and differences between highly skilled migrants and migrants with no skills.

The debate on migration is not always evidence based, with misperceptions being disseminated regarding the threat to security posed by migrants, for example. Insufficient emphasis has been placed on the positive impacts of migration. Migration poses challenges to both host countries and countries of origin. The brain drain from less to more developed economies is an example of the latter.

There are multiple factors that lead to migration, in particular economic and environmental causes. Sovereignty is a reality and there can be varying degrees of openness. At the same time there are moral issues that cannot be ignored, especially regarding vulnerable migrants who seek a better livelihood. International humanitarian law outlaws forced displacement of people. There are abundant examples of best practices from different quarters. In one region, victims of natural disasters are already being given the status of refugees. Conversely, policies that are the product of prejudice or xenophobia are incompatible with international human rights standards and should be rejected and condemned.

In theory all countries should be viable places to live in and migrants should be voluntary and observe legal requirements at entry points. The return of refugees to a country of origin should also be on a voluntary basis. In addition to looking at social, economic and environmental enablers of migration, the international community has a collective responsibility in seeking solutions to conflicts that are at the origin of migration and refugee flows.

There are linkages between the discussions on a Global Compact on Migration and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (see targets 8.8 and 10.7 in particular). Given the absence of comprehensive legally binding instruments on migration, the negotiation within the General Assembly of a Global Compact represents an important step forward, as it produces a platform for common, universally applicable standards and a path to further progress.

Through adoption of the Global Compact the General Assembly will acquire a new role in enhancing international cooperation on migration, on the understanding that the actions foreseen therein are a menu for each country to choose from according to its national situation. The President of the General Assembly will be in a position to exercise leadership in ensuring implementation, follow-up and review of the Global Compact.
SDGs / Financing for Development

Sustainable development remains at the top of member States’ priorities. The universally applicable 2030 Agenda has mobilized governments worldwide and established a paradigm for public policies in the early 21st Century, centered on a new awareness of the in dissociable linkage among economic, social and environmental objectives. However, it is undeniable that numerous challenges remain as regards implementation. While the High Level Political Forum has provided a venue for exchanges on best practices, insufficient resources are currently being channeled to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. While several United Nations Agencies and bodies are quickly adjusting to the new paradigm, there are gaps in the structure that require additional conceptual and operational refinement to deal with areas such as inequality or sustainable patterns of production and consumption. It is expected that the private sector and civil society should play determinant roles in providing resources and impetus to the attainment of the goals within the ascribed time-frame.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will require financial inputs ranging from US$5 to 7 trillion dollars of annual investment across sectors and industries. This figure represents 7 to 10% of global GDP and 25 to 40% of annual global investment. However, at current trends the annual investment gap in developing countries alone stands at around US$ 2,5 trillion per year.

At the current level of private sector participation, there will be a funding shortfall of US$1,6 trillion, in the developing world, to be covered by the public sector (including Official Development Assistance). In principle the international community has the resources to address the needs of the 2030 Agenda. The challenge is one of unlocking the flow of private investment to fulfill SDG targets.

The event hosted by the President of the General Assembly on June 11 was identified as a useful contribution towards examining practical solutions. ODA remains a necessary tool. Sovereign funds and pension funds can provide additional resources. The creation of trust funds for certain regions or continents as well as the mobilization of philanthropy are also avenues to be explored. International venues that attract participation from private sector representatives, such as the Davos World Economic Forum, can become important partners in channeling financial resources towards SDG implementation.
Health and Education are two areas in which private investment is key. SDG´s 3, 4, 6 and 7 address basic needs such as health education, water, sanitation and electrification. The challenge is one of access to these essential needs in the developing world, where only 70% of the population is covered. Special attention is required to the needs of Least Developed Countries. Development Assistance alone cannot overcome the challenge.

As regards infrastructure, waste treatment, sewage, roads, Development Banks should place more lending capacity at the disposal of SDG related projects. Energy transition to low carbon sources would cost US$ 2 trillion a year. The challenge in this regard is not a purely financial one, it is also regulatory. Special interest lobbies can be an obstacle in this respect.

The 2030 Agenda was adopted at the highest political level by consensus in 2015. This commitment by the international community must translate itself into sustained political leadership geared towards the mobilization of the necessary resources in order to accelerate the pace of implementation. The General Assembly and its President have a central role to play in raising awareness both as regards encouraging developments as well as the problematic challenges ahead.

**Conclusion and possible way forward**

The current President of the General Assembly has placed emphasis inter alia on negotiations regarding a Global Compact on Migration, a high-level meeting on Sustaining Peace, promoting progress on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting the centrality of Human Rights on the occasion of the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration and making headway on Security Council reform.

As described above, our meetings focused on what the President of the General Assembly considered the most pressing issues that the United Nations is facing these days. It was also very telling that, throughout all our deliberations, the fact that some challenge the mere existence of the Organization, as we know it, cast a permanent shadow.

There is a sense that some reaffirmation of the Principles of the Charter may be warranted. The question remains on how to foster a constructive debate that could eventually update and reinforce the foundations of the United Nations.
In this context pertinent questions arise:

- Is it feasible, in the current environment, to introduce such a subject for the consideration of Member States through a formal process within the General Assembly?
- Or is it more productive to start with an informal engagement among interested Member States to seek common and shared ground before a broader discussion?

In our final exchange during the third meeting there was support for the notion of the President of the General Assembly using his voice to convey this idea as part of a hand-over message. Such an action could allow the incoming President of the General Assembly to carry it on. It will be in her hands to decide on the most appropriate way to move forward weighting different alternatives, opting either for a structured approach or a more informal one.

There is great significance for the President of the General Assembly to take this step. It will be part of the legacy of his work, highlighting the issue that permanently loomed in the horizon during his year at the helm of the General Assembly. It is also a way to demonstrate continuity, between tenures, in dealing with what seems to be the most profound challenge that the United Nations is facing: the nature of its own being in the XXI Century. It will be an invaluable contribution by this President of the General Assembly in seeking a better world for all.
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