

## **Memo to Congress: The UN works**

By Johan Bergenas – 19 April 2011

Last week Congress voted to cut its contributions to the United Nations by 20 percent and the John Boltons of the world continue to scorn the organization. Yet, when it comes to the U.N. preventing the spread of the atomic bomb, its recent impact is of nuclear proportions.

Consider the gains made concerning the development of Iran's nuclear program. In June last year, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1929, reinforcing export prohibitions vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear infrastructure, while also slapping unprecedented economic sanctions on the country. The Council acted after continued Iranian violations of the nuclear rules of the road. In turn, this solid punitive platform provided the United States, the European Union, and half a dozen other countries the opportunity to adopt even harsher unilateral sanctions with little visible pushback from the international community.

Clearly, the Iranian nuclear conundrum is far from solved and the imposition of sanctions is only one tool utilized during this tense process. But actions taken by the U.N. Security Council achieved its intended purpose - which is all that we can ask from it. As a result, these international efforts have substantially hindered Iranian nuclear aspirations. On that point, senior officials in Washington and Tehran find uncommon common ground.

And when it comes to multilateral treaties, in the last few years the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty - the accord banning all but five states from acquiring nuclear weapons - has gained in strength. In 2005, Kofi Annan, the former U.N. Secretary General, said that the treaty was in a "crisis of confidence." The comments were made in light of North Korea leaving the treaty, Iran's nuclear debauchery surfacing, and the slow progress made on global nuclear disarmament.

However, at an international meeting held last spring to assess the progress of the flagship nonproliferation accord, diplomats on site testified to a much improved political climate on nonproliferation and disarmament. And recently, a senior Egyptian official credited President Obama for setting a new tone for increased cooperation and progress on strengthening the treaty.

Meanwhile, U.N. measures have gone from being widely unpopular and largely disregarded among numerous U.N. members to being widely accepted pillars of the nonproliferation regime. Resolution 1540, which was renewed on April 20, 2011, is an excellent example.

When adopted in 2004, this WMD terrorism nonproliferation measure was criticized for being voted by the 15 member states of the UN Security Council only, as opposed to negotiated in a more inclusive forum. Resolution 1540 was perceived as Western states shoving another nonproliferation obligation down developing countries throats. In response to this perceived "western-centric" agenda, many countries did not implement it.

Today, the measure is widely considered a crucial component of the nonproliferation regime. And poorer countries are able to use the funding available from resolution 1540 to build capacity in areas directly affecting their citizens' daily lives, such as small arms and drugs countertrafficking. The net result is greater involvement by the developing world in nonproliferation efforts.

What is the reason for U.N.'s recent string of successes in nuclear nonproliferation? John Bolton provides the answer: "The United States makes the UN work when it wants it to work."

Undeniably, the United States' strong normative contributions to the multilateral organization in recent years have played a pivotal role. Without American engagement and its recognition of the U.N. as a legitimate and important actor, the U.N. is less effective.

Despite the progress made, the U.N. will continue to be derided. The controversy in part stems from the herculean missions the founders tasked the multilateral organization: among them facilitating cooperation in international law, safeguarding international security, and achieving world peace. Each one of these goals is utopian, but as Annan has pointed out, the U.N.'s role is not "to usurp the role of sovereign states but to enable states to serve their peoples better by working together." Presently, the U.N.'s work to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons undeniably demonstrates such value.

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