U.N. struggles to prove its relevance
By Colum Lynch, Sunday, 19 September 2010

UNITED NATIONS - President Obama will travel this week to New York for the annual U.N. gathering of world leaders to reaffirm America’s commitment to a "new era of multilateralism." He will arrive, however, at a time when the United Nations, the world’s principal multilateral institution, is struggling to remain relevant on the world stage.

From nuclear diplomacy with North Korea to economic negotiations among the Group of 20 nations and peace talks in the Middle East, U.N. diplomats have frequently been reduced to bit players over the past year.

Even on climate change, an issue on which the United Nations has tried to stake its claim, the world body has failed to show much progress. Highly anticipated negotiations in Copenhagen ran aground in December.

For an institution with its share of proud chapters, these are tough times.

"A lot of the juice is outside the United Nations," said Bruce Jones, the director of the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. "The old days when the U.S. and the Europeans could stitch things up at the United Nations are over, and we haven’t yet seen the emergence of a new platform for action or a consortium for action at the U.N."

Jones noted that the growing assertiveness of emerging powers - particularly China - has made it harder to reach international compromise. But the United Nations has been hobbled by failures, and distractions, of its own making.

The outgoing head of an anti-corruption office delivered a parting shot to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in July, accusing him of leading the United Nations into an era of decline. More recently, the top Chinese official at the United Nations, in an alcohol-
fueled outburst, noted at a U.N. retreat that he had never really liked Americans, or his boss, Ban.

Asked to comment about the Chinese diplomat at a recent press briefing, the secretary general sighed and urged reporters to turn their attention to more pressing international problems.

The U.N. General Assembly, the world's biggest international diplomatic debate, still provides an opportunity to take stock of America's role in the world, as well as a platform for authoritarian leaders to air their grievances. During the past decade, the General Assembly chamber has reflected the strains of global policymaking, with President George W. Bush lecturing the world body about its failure to confront Saddam Hussein and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez famously comparing Bush to the devil.

This year, the mood is favorable for an American president who has restored U.S. funding to the United Nations, ended a U.S. boycott of the U.N. Human Rights Council, and reinvigorated U.N. nuclear disarmament efforts.

On Wednesday, Obama will also reaffirm U.S. support for a series of U.N. development targets, known as the Millennium Development Goals, before the General Assembly begins in earnest.

The Obama administration, however, will make no new financial pledges to the campaign.

Susan E. Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said that the administration "set out to rather dramatically change the tone and the substance of our engagement" with the world body, whose relationship with the United Nations was marked largely by confrontation.

She highlighted U.S. initiatives to impose U.N. sanctions on North Korea and Iran. She said the United Nations was providing a critical role in managing peace efforts in places including Sudan and supporting U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. And she noted the United Nations's vital role in responding to natural disasters in places such as Haiti and Pakistan.

"We've seen tangible results that in fact will make Americans safer and make the world a more peaceful and prosperous place," she said. "We've ended needless U.S. isolation on a range of issues."

Still, during the past two years, the U.N. Security Council has made fewer decisions than at any time since the end of the Cold War, according to a report by the Security Council Report, an independent, nonprofit group.

U.N. peacekeeping, which grew rapidly during the Bush administration, has stalled. Not a single new U.N. peacekeeping mission has been authorized since Obama came into office, though the council has authorized additional troops to ensure order in Haiti after the January earthquake.

The United States and its European allies, meanwhile, have opposed calls by African governments to send the United Nations back into Somalia. And the council mounted a largely anemic effort to prevent mass atrocities of civilians in Sri Lanka. Russia, meanwhile, blocked any discussion of a peacekeeping force for Kyrgyzstan to halt violence against ethnic Uzbeks earlier this year. In Congo, the United Nations has admitted failing to provide adequate protections for victims of mass rape.

"The feeling that I get watching the [Obama] administration is that their heart is certainly there," said John Ruggie, a professor at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of
Government and an adviser to Ban. "The willingness to be supportive is certainly there, but with so many other issues to juggle and deal with I don't think [the U.N.] has become a real focus of attention."

In perhaps its most important challenge at the moment, the United Nations is leading the effort to oversee a referendum on independence for southern Sudan - a ballot that threatens to reignite one of Africa's bloodiest civil wars if it's not seen as credible.

In a bid to bolster the U.N. effort, Obama will participate in a high-level meeting this week to prod Sudan's rival camps to commit to a peaceful vote.

Edward Luck, a historian at the International Peace Institute who acts as an informal adviser to Ban, said the U.N. effort to find its way has been complicated by a "geopolitical strategic situation that is very, very murky."

"The U.N. reflects that," he said. "The world is muddling through as the U.N. is muddling through."

Luck said that situation will only become more difficult in the coming year as key emerging powers - including Brazil, India, South Africa, Turkey and Nigeria - get their turns as members on the Security Council for two-year terms. Brazil and Turkey, who are also serving, have used their position to challenge the existing order on the council, mounting a campaign, for instance, to thwart the U.S. push for sanctions on Iran.

But Luck said he was confident that the United Nations would remain a key player, noting that there are no other international institutions with the capacity to implement their policies on the ground or with the same kind of political legitimacy that comes with being an organization with universal membership.

"The U.N. is not the sun of the international solar system; everything doesn't revolve around it," he said. "But it is the final reference point on most issues, which have to come to the U.N. for legitimacy."