

Reforming the UN: its staff is the starting point

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UN: today? No; tomorrow? perhaps; the day after tomorrow? For sure. The story of the UN and its weak influence on the world stage is a common one.

The UN is too wide and democratic to reach a consensus, too narrow and too restricted in its central forum (the Security Council) theoretically too incisive to be able to represent the interests of the international Community and too bureaucratic to answer the pressing needs that the world imposes.

One fact remains: when the protagonists or the antagonists of international politics find themselves in difficulty, they inevitably resort to the UN which is the guarantor of some of the fundamental principles that lawyers would call the “Grundgesetz” of the international arena.

The return of the United States to the UN within the Iraq crisis is only the latest example of the recurring story in which, following an initial exclusion of the UN from big political decisions, one is then forced to involve it in a desperate attempt to reach consensus and find an effective solution to the problem.

The UN, like other international organizations, is constituted of nation states and therefore of complex and delicate dynamics and relations. It has always been so since its foundation. But in important historical milestones, from to Suez in 1956, Lebanon in 1958, the Congo in 1969 and in the War of the Yow Kippur of 1973, it was UN that ensured a safety exit for the leading countries, especially in the delicate context of the Cold War. Galvanising agreement, even if temporarily, between the USA, USSR, China, France and United Kingdom was not an impossible task.

One thing is clear: some aspects of the San Francisco Treaty and the UN’s internal mechanics are now anachronistic. In order to work, the UN needs to reform. Institutions, like states and people either walk with history or are relentlessly overcome by it.

Since we cannot afford a world without the UN and without a form of international policy governance, all recent proposals to reform the UN have an equally worthy aim as long as they aim to improve the mechanisms of the institution rather than creating new inefficiencies.

The same Secretary General, Kofi Annan, initiated at the start of 2004 a high level panel on UN reform which has unfortunately been neglected by the media. A group of “Wise Men” is drafting reform proposals, reporting directly to the General Secretary, that by the end of the year should make the results public. But it is as if, in this case also, the climate of distrust was generalized. It is unthinkable that an Institution that has operating difficulties can be able to regenerate from the inside.

Perhaps, if the UN wants an important role in the international scene, it should concentrate on the resources it has proved to possess: its Human Resources and Mediation role.

Just think of some of history’s key moments in the post-war period and the role that important UN men have played.

In 1954 after the capture of seventeen American pilots by China, the world was for the first time on the brink of a nuclear crisis. The UN was asked belatedly to intervene. The Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld, went to Beijing and started a series of secret meetings for over six months that led to the liberation of the hostages, a mediation role that was for the most part ignored by the US press.

The resolution of the Cuban missiles crisis, another milestone of the atomic century, was possible also because of the letter that the then Secretary General, U Thant, wrote to Nikita Khrushchev. The answer of the PCUS Secretary was the first, authentic overture to mediation in a situation that was otherwise degenerating fast.

Right after the Yom Kippur war (1973), the Egyptian request for aid from the Soviet Union risked triggering a direct confrontation with the USA. Nixon had already declared the nuclear alarm. Thanks to the convergence of numerous countries (especially from the Third World), the UN blue helmets were deployed in the area of the isthmus in less than forty-eight hours.

Looking to more recent times, a more tangible trace of wise diplomacy has been left by Javier Pérez de Cuellar, a Peruvian with a refined style, from the European culture and technically more prepared than all his predecessors. De Cuellar can be accredited for most of the reconciliation work between Iraq and Iran as well as the attempts to reason on how the UN could survive after the Cold War.

With Boutros Boutros Ghali, the UN initially seemed to orient itself more towards a vocation for the developing countries. The world, in effects, was characterized by political – military crises of medium or high intensity, but however localized under a geographic aspect. To Boutros Ghali is attributed the first “codification” of the blue helmets and the UN in missions of peace – keeping.

The Egyptian, former Minister of the Foreign Affairs, concentrated a lot on the Balkan issue and the dramatic collapse of the former Yugoslavia. He sent there a Japanese diplomat, Yasushi Akashi, not necessarily a Balkans expert but rigorous in negotiation. The dramatic conclusion of the efforts to negotiate and the necessity of military intervention to stop the slaughter in Bosnia and then in Kosovo, was legitimized by the political support of the entire international community and of the Security Council. Behind the Balkan scenes another multilateral diplomat began operating for United Nations, this time of Italian origins: Giandomenico Picco. Vice Secretary General for the Political Affairs from 1973 to 1992, Picco has had an important role in the hard negotiations for the liberation of the hostages during the Lebanon crisis (experience he describes with emotion in his book *Man without a Gun*), in the attainment of the cease fire between Iran and Iraq and in the Balkan crises. Picco has been also the personal Representative of the General Secretary for the Conference of Geneva in Afghanistan (1998).

Boutros Ghali’s UN experience ended with the international disappointment for the failure of the mission of the United Nations in Somalia, and the rushed organization of the Italo-american naval convoy in order to save Blue helmets that were prey to the violence of the armed groups.

One can debate the representativeness of a man like the Ghanaian Kofi Annan, at the top of the UN. It is true that Annan at his second mandate, found himself managing the most difficult phase of international relations in recent history, a task that is anything but easy.

In a world no longer inclined to multilateralism or multipolarism, but instead more and more leaning towards one single powerful country, the configuration of the world order rested upon Annan and the UN. The fact remains that the United States today cannot seem to be able to operate without two Africans: the Ghanaian Kofi Annan and the Algerian Lakhdar Brahimi, special envoy in Iraq. Just like, with a less than friendly and trusting spirit towards the Muslim world, Washington

could not do anything but ratify the nomination of the Pakistani Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, successor of Sergio Viera de Mello, who was killed in a terrorist attack on 19 August 2003 in Baghdad. Even with its distrust towards the UN institution, the USA seems to recognize (without making it explicit) the qualities of the negotiators inside of the United Nations.

Whether because of the multiethnic characteristics of the UN meetings, or because of the continuous exchange of the different cultural solicitations and for the complete preparation of those who work for such a prestigious organisation, entrusting oneself to UN mediators is considered obligatory when trying to enforce the commitment to the resolution of a conflict.

It continues to carry out an obscure and complex job, even with alternate results. The Special Coordinator of Kofi Annan for the peace process in the Holy Land, Terje Roed – Larsen, him and not Anthony Zinni, managed to bring Israelis and Palestinians to the same table, a major result considering the climate that reigns in the entire Middle East. Zinni, ex general in retirement, of Italian origins, had been sent directly by Bush to make his mark, when the two sides began to cause trouble. Negotiation, however, is another thing.

Just like another Italo – american who has lived in the corridors and the rooms of UN HQ, John Negroponte who is engaged daily in a delicate job between the current Iraq government and the coalition forces. Negroponte was greatly marginalized as the USA's UN Representative, given the position taken by the Bush Administration in respect to Saddam Hussein.

We cannot do without the UN. But above all we cannot do without the men who work and train in the United Nations dedicating themselves to something that is more than just a job.

This perhaps would be a good starting point to renew the UN: a UN consisting of men with political vision and able to rise to the challenges of mediation and negotiation.

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