

# Reforming the United Nations: Prospects and Limitations

By

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## **Abstract**

*Created by 51 countries in 1945, the United Nations (UN) needs a radical reform. The Heads of State and Government committed 191 countries, through the 2005 World Summit Outcome (Appendix), to continue the efforts to reform the UN to make it more efficient, effective and relevant. Many substantive aspects of the document still need further elaboration and multilateral negotiations.*

*The document reaffirms fundamental values and contains clear commitments on steps needed to reach, by 2015, the development goals agreed upon at the Millennium Summit in September 2000. It is aimed at strengthening the UN's capacity for peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-*

*building, including a detailed project for a new peace-building commission. It contains recommendations to establish a Human Rights Council.*

*A more dynamic reform process is needed. It has to be tailored to respond effectively to the most ominous threats to international peace and security. If "effective multilateralism" is to be achieved, all States have to go beyond what is immediately significant and urgent to each of them at a strictly national level and help bring about a new multilateral approach for a new agenda on substantive and institutional issues.*

*Member States cannot establish a new world policy agenda without an effective UN system adapted to the new realities of a changing human society at planetary level.*

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*In times when there are voices calling into question the relevance and even the utility of the world organization and when the UN Secretariat has to cope with a succession of recent mismanagement revelations, additional efforts are necessary to visibly ensure the UN's efficiency and credibility. The Security Council should be enlarged and adapted to the new realities and increasing demands. But how? The divergences of views are still great.*

*Whatever the qualifications given to the 2005 World Summit Outcome, the UN reform encouraged by it is still a work in progress. It conveys a mandate for change, but without offering practical consensus solutions. Words and promises are insufficient. They must be followed by convincing action able to give tangibility to existing commitments and to bring the world organization's founding ideals to life.*

## **1. Fundamental Issues**

The United Nations (UN) is at a pivotal moment in its sixty-year history. On 24 October 1945 the world organization officially came into existence as a result of the ratification of its Charter by China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, the United States and by a majority of other 51 initial members. Today, the UN, with its universal composition of 191 member states, is forced by unprecedented developments to

critically evaluate its past in order to ensure its very survival. The UN system is under fire, but renovative action is slow in developing.

The main shortcomings of the UN are primarily rooted in the dysfunctional global order, but in some countries the epithets of irrelevant, impotent, obsolete are used to describe the UN. (1) Beyond all criticism, there is a valid sober question: Is the UN constellation still functionally linked to the profoundly changing international environment?

There is a general agreement that the UN needs reform. Dictionaries inform us that the first meaning of reform is “the improvement of what is wrong, corrupt, unsatisfactory.” (2) However, while all agree that reforming for strengthening the UN is an essential task, there is no consensus on what fundamental changes should be made.

The international community is expected to find the necessary political will to remedy the UN's failings and to mitigate existing animosities which risk condemning the world organization to atrophy. This task is very difficult. The word “reform” does not even appear in the mandate of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change appointed in 2003 by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and led by Anand Panyarachun, former Prime Minister of Thailand, which produced a referential report. (3) Finding consensus on all crucial issues seems like a “mission