

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

February 11, 2011

Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the World Affairs Council of Oregon, Portland, Oregon, February 11, 2011

Thank you all for coming out. I know it must have been hard from some of you to tear yourselves away from CNN tonight. I want to thank so much for your generous introduction Senator Merkley. On behalf of President Obama, let me thank you for your strong leadership on many important issues—from clean energy to helping ratify the New START Treaty.

I'm grateful as well to Maria Wulff and Tim DuRouch of the Oregon World Affairs Council, and to everyone else who helped pull this event together. We're meeting at the end of an extraordinary day—a rare moment in our lives when we have had the privilege to witness history in the making. The proud people of Egypt have reminded the world of the power of human dignity and the universal longing for liberty. The American people have been deeply inspired by the scenes in Cairo and across that great ancient land. President Obama today recalled the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "There is something in the soul that cries out for freedom." As those cries came from Tahrir Square, they moved the entire world. The United States will fully support a credible and irreversible transition to genuine democracy in Egypt.

February 11 is turning out to be one of those dates that echoes in history. How many of you remember that 21 years ago today, Nelson Mandela walked out of prison? There were those who said that South Africa could not handle democracy, that it would set off a wave of instability and violence. Instead it set off a wave of liberty for South Africans. Many people thought South Africa couldn't do it. South Africa proved the naysayers wrong. I'm very confident the people of Egypt can do the same. Now, let me turn from a day of astonishing change to some of the changes we have made in America's approach to the wider world.

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

We're now two years into the Obama Administration. At a time of economic trial and sweeping change, we've made America stronger and more secure by pursuing a strategy of national renewal and energetic global leadership. Tonight, I want to discuss how the United Nations fits into that strategy—why we need the UN, how it makes us all safer, and what we're doing to fix its shortcomings and help fulfill its potential.

In these tough economic times, we're focused on getting our economy growing and providing jobs to Americans who're hurting. Yet even as we get our own house in order, we cannot afford to ignore problems beyond our borders. When nuclear weapons materials remain unsecured in many countries around the world, all our children are at risk. When states are wracked by conflict or ravaged by poverty, they can incubate threats that spread across borders—from terrorism to pandemic disease, from criminal networks to environmental degradation. Like it or not, we live in a new era of challenges that cross borders as freely as a storm—challenges that even the world's most powerful country often cannot tackle alone. In the 21st century, indifference is not an option. It's not just immoral. It's dangerous.

Now more than ever, Americans' security and wellbeing are inextricably linked to those of people everywhere. Now more than ever, we need common responses to global problems. And that is why America is so much better off—so much stronger, so much safer and more secure—in a world with the United Nations than we would be in a world without it. Main Street America needs the United Nations, and so do you and I, especially in these tough economic times. America can't police every conflict, end every crisis, and shelter every refugee. The UN provides a real return on our tax dollars by bringing 192 countries together to share the cost of providing stability, vital aid, and hope in the world's most broken places. Because of the UN, the world doesn't look to America to solve every problem alone. And the UN offers our troops in places like Afghanistan the international legitimacy and support that comes only from a Security Council mandate—which, in turn, is a force multiplier for our soldiers on the frontlines.

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

It is all too easy to find cases where the UN could be more efficient and effective. I spend plenty of time pointing them out and trying to fix them—and not always diplomatically. But judging the UN solely by isolated cases of mismanagement or corruption misses the forest for the trees. We're far better off working to strengthen the UN than trying to starve it—and then having to choose between filling the void ourselves or leaving real threats untended.

The American public—you get it. An October 2010 survey by a bipartisan team of respected pollsters, led by Bill McInturff and Geoff Garin, found that 72 percent of Americans support paying our UN peacekeeping dues in full and on time. The American people are fundamentally pragmatic. They know, after all, that America created the UN. In 1942, during World War II, Franklin Delano Roosevelt summoned 26 allies to Washington to sign the Declaration of the United Nations and pledged “to defend life, liberty, independence and religious freedom.” As President Truman subsequently boasted, “We started the United Nations. It was our idea.” Years later, President Reagan affirmed: “We are determined that the United Nations shall succeed and serve the cause of peace for humankind.”

Roosevelt and Truman were practical men who wanted common action to halt aggression and prevent another world war. As one of the UN's greatest Secretaries-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, put it, the UN was designed “not to bring humanity to heaven but to save it from hell.” Over the years, we've learned the price of letting global problems go unaddressed. So the UN has taken on huge responsibilities for keeping the peace—and for saving innocent civilians not just from the hell of conflict but also from the hell of displacement, disease, and despair.

The truth is: the UN has also picked up some bad habits along the way, and we must continue to be clear about its shortcomings. You hear a lot of criticism of the UN from some quarters—and, I confess, I agree with some of it. But we must not lose sight of the many burdens the UN helps shoulder and the many benefits it provides to every American.

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

Some critics argue that we should withhold our UN dues to try to force certain reforms, or that we should just pay for those UN programs we like the most. This is short-sighted, and it plain just doesn't work. The United States tried this tactic during parts of the 1980s and 1990s, and the result was that we were more isolated and less potent. That is because great and proud nations like ours are judged by their example. They are expected to keep their treaty commitments and pay their bills. When we shirk our responsibilities, our influence wanes, and our standing is diminished. Imagine going to a restaurant, getting a pretty good steak that could have been cooked a little better, and then skipping out on the check. We just cannot lead from a position of strength when we're awash in unpaid bills. We cannot depend on UN missions in Iraq and Afghanistan to help our troops return home safely and in success—and then decimate the budgets that fund them. And, if we treat our legally binding financial obligations like some kind of a la carte menu, we invite others to do the same. So, instead of paying just 22 percent of the nearly half a billion dollar annual cost of crucial UN support operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, we'd be stuck with almost the whole tab ourselves.

Yet paying our bills in full and on time doesn't mean giving the UN a pass. As we work with Congress in a bipartisan spirit to meet our responsibilities, we continue to lead the charge for serious and comprehensive reform. The UN has far more to do to create a culture of economy, ethics, and excellence. The UN must be more lean, more nimble, and more cost-effective. In recent years, the United States has spurred important changes, including revitalizing the UN Ethics Office, now headed by a respected American. The newly appointed UN inspector-general is a tough Canadian auditor committed to whipping into shape an atrophied investigations division. And no one has pushed harder than the U.S. to protect whistleblowers, impose budget discipline, and promote transparency. But the UN still has much to do to reduce bureaucracy, reap savings, reward talent, and retire underperformers.

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

Some Americans believe the UN infringes on American sovereignty. Frankly, I am baffled by this concern. The fact is: the UN can't tax us. It can't override U.S. law. The UN can't order our soldiers into battle. It can't take away our Second Amendment rights. The UN can't impose social norms on us. And it doesn't begin to have any much-hyped fleet of secret black helicopters. The truth is: the UN Security Council can't even issue a press release without America's blessing. The UN depends entirely on its member states, not the other way around. When the UN stumbles, it's usually because its members stumble—because big powers duck tough issues in the Security Council or spoilers grandstand in the General Assembly. As one of my predecessors, the late Richard Holbrooke, was fond of saying, “Blaming the UN when things go wrong is like blaming Madison Square Garden when the Knicks play badly.”

Others charge that UN peacekeepers haven't done enough to stop rape and sexual abuse on their watch and occasionally even perpetrate abuses. Indeed, the epidemic of rape in conflict zones is shocking and horrific. That's why the United States has consistently led Security Council efforts to strengthen the mandates and means to protect civilians. That's why we pushed to create a high-level office to combat sexual violence against women and girls in conflict zones. And that's why we consistently champion accountability for genocide and justice for war criminals, whoever they are. But let's not forget the practical limitations on what peacekeepers can do. The Democratic Republic of Congo is a country the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River, with few roads, few cops, and far too many marauders. Some 20,000 peacekeepers with only a couple dozen helicopters can hardly be everywhere they may be needed all the time. Even as we demand that the UN do more and do better, we must focus our attention on the main problem: thugs with guns who deliberately use rape as a weapon of war.

Many others lament that the UN is too focused on singling out Israel. On that, they're right. UN members devote disproportionate attention to Israel and consistently adopt biased resolutions, which too often divert attention

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

from the world's most egregious human rights abuses. I spend a good deal of time working to ensure that Israel's legitimacy is beyond dispute and its security is never in doubt. The tough issues between Israelis and Palestinians can only be solved by direct negotiations between the two parties, not in New York. We've been blunt about the deep flaws of the Goldstone Report and the Human Rights Council's inquiry into the tragic flotilla episode. We'll keep fighting to ensure that Israel has the same rights and responsibilities as all states—including membership in all appropriate regional groupings at the UN. Efforts to chip away at Israel's legitimacy will continue to be met by the frontal opposition of the United States.

Some people have criticized the Obama Administration for having sought and won a seat on the UN Human Rights Council in 2009. We have no illusions about the Human Rights Council, and we get why some people think of it as a symbol for what ails the UN. But, let me tell you this: the results were worse when America sat on the sidelines. Dictators frequently weren't called to account; abused citizens couldn't count on their voices being heard; and Israel was still bashed. We've got a long way to go to transform the Human Rights Council, but we've already gotten important results by working for real change from within. We helped set up the first-ever Special Rapporteur to monitor crackdowns on civil society groups and protect the right to free assembly and association. We twice renewed the term of the UN's Independent Expert on Sudan—the only international mechanism tracking human rights violations throughout the country. We shone the spotlight on abuses in Kyrgyzstan, Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. And, instead of abandoning Israel, we've been there to contest moves to single it out unfairly.

Put simply, some of the criticisms of the UN are overdone, and some are right on the money. Despite the UN's flaws, it's indispensable to our security in this age of tighter bonds and tighter belts. Let me provide a bit of perspective. Out of every tax dollar you pay, 34 cents goes to Social Security and Medicare, 22 cents to national security and our amazing military, and a

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

nickel to paying interest on the national debt. Just one-tenth of a single penny goes to pay our UN dues. And here's what that buys you.

First, the UN helps prevent conflict and keep the peace around the globe. Since 1948, UN missions have saved lives, averted wars, and helped bring democracy to dozens of countries. More than 120,000 military, police, and civilian peacekeepers are now deployed in 14 operations around the world, from Haiti to Darfur to East Timor. Of those 120,000 peacekeepers, just 87 are Americans in uniform. Every peacekeeping mission must be approved by the Security Council—where America has a final say over all decisions. In Iraq and Afghanistan, UN civilian missions are mediating local disputes, coordinating international aid, and helping advance democracy—all of which helps us bring our soldiers home responsibly. UN “peacebuilding” efforts help rebuild shattered societies and prevent yesterday's hatreds from sparking tomorrow's infernos. And UN mediation has helped broker the end of conflicts, from Cambodia to Guatemala.

Each UN peacekeeper costs a fraction of what it would cost to field a U.S. soldier to do the same job. So what's better, for America to bear the entire burden, or to share the burden for UN peacekeepers and pay a little more than a quarter of the cost? I don't know about you, but personally, I like places where I get 75 percent off. This is burden-sharing for a reasonable price—a lifesaving way to enable others to join us in preventing the conflict and chaos that can breed terrorism, pandemics, and other 21st-century threats. It's a whole lot more responsible to work together and share responsibility than to let threats multiply and innocents suffer.

Second, the UN helps halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In 2009, President Obama presided over an historic Security Council summit that unanimously adopted robust, binding steps to reduce nuclear dangers. The International Atomic Energy Agency, a key UN agency, has exposed Iran and North Korea's nuclear violations. And in the past two years, with U.S. leadership, the Security Council imposed the toughest sanctions that Iran and North Korea have ever faced. Strong Security Council resolutions have

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

provided a foundation for others—from the European Union to Canada to South Korea—to levy additional sanctions of their own. And they warn governments that would defy their international obligations that they too will face isolation and consequences.

Third, UN humanitarian agencies go where nobody else will go to provide desperately needed food, shelter, and medicine. When polio erupted in Central Asia last year, health ministries were caught off-guard—but the World Health Organization vaccinated 6 million kids in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, at a cost of less than \$2 million. Where young people are at risk from deadly disease, UNICEF provides vaccines to fully 40 percent of the world's children and supplies millions of insecticide-treated mosquito nets in 48 countries to prevent malaria. When 125,000 Iraqi refugees were huddled in the winter chill, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees provided cash grants to buy heating fuel and warm clothes. When floods devastated Pakistan last year, the World Food Program helped feed 6.9 million people. UN humanitarian assistance doesn't just save lives. It also helps break the devastating downward spiral of chronic desperation that fuels violence and threatens international peace and security.

Fourth, the UN helps countries combat poverty, including by championing the lifesaving Millennium Development Goals. These goals include cutting extreme poverty in half and slashing the mortality rate of children under 5 by two-thirds by the year 2015. We're all more secure when people around the world have a shot at the better future we insist on for our own kids. It should trouble us deeply that half of humanity lives on less than \$2.50 a day. Desperate poverty and the lack of basic services can fuel war and turmoil, creating ready havens for terrorists, criminals, and drug traffickers. Fortunately, UN development efforts afford millions the opportunity for a more dignified future. By investing in our common humanity, we simultaneously strengthen our common security.

Fifth, the UN helps foster democracy by providing expertise and oversight to strengthen fragile state institutions and support elections worldwide.

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

Through the UN, when the people of South Sudan vote for their own freedom, the world can lend a vital hand. And when a strongman like Laurent Gbagbo of the Ivory Coast tries to steal an election, the UN, on behalf of the world, can blow the whistle.

Finally, the UN is a place where countries can come together to advance universal human rights and condemn the world's worst indignities. U.S. leadership has helped produce important results in the UN General Assembly, where we have condemned Iran, Burma, and North Korea's human rights abuses by unprecedented vote margins. We have fought and won protection for gay rights, and created UN Women, a new agency dedicated to advancing women's rights. Those steps and many more help rally the world to support bedrock U.S. and universal values: liberty, equality, and human dignity.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the 21st century, we need the UN more than ever—to help bridge the gaps between war and reconciliation, between division and cooperation, and between misery and hope.

Those of us—Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike—who support the United Nations owe it to American taxpayers to ensure that their dollars are well and cleanly spent. But, equally, those who push to curtail U.S. support to the United Nations owe it to U.S. soldiers to explain why they should perform missions now handled by United Nations peacekeepers, and they owe it to parents around the world to explain why their children should suffer without the medicine, food, and shelter that only the United Nations provides.

The United Nations plays an indispensable role in advancing our interests and defending our values. It provides a real return to the American taxpayer on our investment. The United Nations isn't perfect—far from it. The United Nations isn't the sum of our strategy—not even close. But it's an essential piece of it.

Facing 21st-Century Threats: Why America Needs the UN

As my friend and mentor, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, has said, “There is a vast, sensible middle ground between those who see the United Nations as the only hope for the world and those who see in it the end of the world.” A wise and deep bipartisan tradition has long seen the United Nations as essential to spurring the common actions that make Americans safer. That tradition recognizes that, if the United Nations didn’t exist, we would have to invent it. Thankfully, we did help invent it. Our challenge today is to strengthen it—and in doing so, to make America more secure.

Thank you very much.