

Don't forget to reform the UN

After the focus on the G20 and the financial crisis, we must remember the security council is also in dire need of change

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After a week during which the eyes of the world were on the G20 summit and the state of the world economy, we should not forget that our international peace and security institutions are in equal need of reform – first and foremost the UN security council. After all, the next emergency calling for a global response could be in foreign rather than financial affairs.

Away from the cameras and under the public radar so far, diplomats at the UN in New York are quietly working towards strengthening multilateralism's muscle, the security council. This February finally saw the successful launch of real reform negotiations, which I have the privilege of chairing on behalf of the president of the UN general assembly. While differences on, for instance, the size and composition of a revamped security council remain, all delegations have agreed to work them out at the negotiating table and all aspire to forge a council that reflects the global realities of the 21st century, not the mid-20th century.

The international economic institutions now under intense scrutiny were set up during the Bretton Woods conference back in 1944. Only slightly younger and just as stuck in a timewarp is the security council, the most powerful multilateral political body. When they signed the UN charter at the 1945 San Francisco conference, world leaders entrusted the maintenance of international peace and security to the council, with the ultimate goal of, in the words of the charter, saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

Special rights and responsibilities were assumed by the big three second world war allies, Russia (then still the Soviet Union), the UK and the US, plus China and France. These five took up permanent seats around the horseshoe-shaped table and secured the right to veto any resolution tabled in the council.

From those post-war days to our post-cold war era, the council did not change much, even if the world did. With many African and Asian nations throwing off the shackles of colonialism, the UN's membership nearly quadrupled from 51 to 192. We saw not just new countries but also new powers emerge outside the west, as "the rise of the rest" created our contemporary multipolar world.

Yet while the times were changing at breakneck speed, the security council remained more or less the same, with the sole exception of the addition of four

non-permanent seats in the 1960s. The current composition of five permanent (the P5 in UN-speak) and 10 non-permanent members, drawn from different regions and elected for two-year terms by all countries in the UN, is the enduring result of that 1963 tweak.

In the same year, a young and charismatic American president made the case for ongoing change at the UN when he addressed the entire UN membership: "The United Nations cannot survive as a static organisation ... Its charter must be changed as well as its customs. The authors of that charter did not intend that it be frozen in perpetuity." But ever since the year John F Kennedy spoke those words at the height of the cold war, the security council, the UN's most powerful body, has actually remained frozen in time.

Fortunately, it seems that we are now finally heeding his words. All the UN's 192 member states have signed up to the current negotiation effort to create a more legitimate and effective security council. Arguably, today's general public is more often dissatisfied with the UN because it has done too little, such as in Rwanda in the 1990s or Darfur, rather than too much. The security council can become more effective and save more lives if it is widely perceived as a more representative and thus more legitimate body. Harvard professor Joseph Nye, who coined the now oft-used term "soft power", has stated that legitimacy, an important part of soft power, is in fact the main tool the UN has to carve out a place for itself in the international order.

Most high-level actors in that international order are now understandably preoccupied with putting out the economic fire raging in the global village. But they neglect the need to also modernise international peace and security institutions, especially the security council, at their own peril. The world needs to be vigilant in both financial and foreign affairs and ready to deal with not just incomes falling down but also peace falling apart in the blink of an eye. Only a few blocks from the ground zero of this recession, Wall Street, we find a strong and stark reminder of that imperative: the gaping hole of the World Trade Centre site, the real Ground Zero.