



Understanding the U.N. — Perspective from a Small State

**This address
was delivered by**

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No institution has gone through as volatile a swing of public opinion as the United Nations. The United Nations has been reviled, put on a pedestal and then marginalized. The U.N. has been the object of criticism in the U.S. Congress though the U.S. public supports the U.N. You will recall that Senator Jesse Helms, when he was Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, blocked payment of U.S. dues to the U.N. The United Nations was seen to be oversized and overpriced. When I was Singapore's Permanent Representative to the U.N. from 1989-91, I recall a story that was told to me: A young boy was taken by his father to look at this venerable building by Le Corbusier, the renowned French architect on 1st Avenue/44th Street, the United Nations. As they looked up at the building the young boy said to his father, "Dad, how many people work there?" The father pondered, then replied, "About half."

But things have changed. It is said that since Kofi Annan became Secretary-General, and in response to U.S. criticism and the criticisms of other countries, and the push for reform in the U.N., much of the waste and inefficiencies have been cleaned up. So much so, because of the good work of the U.N., the international organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001 for the role it played in contributions to peace and security. East Timor was part of it. So was its work in Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia and Burundi. Today, in light of the organization's negative response to the U.S. request for a mandate to use force against Iraq, by passing the second resolution, it was marginalized. It is considered marginalized by many serious analysts of international politics and international organizations.

Truth is, you never appreciate an institution, especially one as complex as the U.N., unless you take a long-term perspective and look deeper at the institution. I will say with great confidence that if the U.N. were not created, we would be struggling hard to create such an institution today, last year, and the years before that. This is especially so with the problems of globalization and its consequences.

The U.N. was conceived to deal with inter-state conflicts but increasingly intra-state conflicts have gained our share of attention.

The U.N. was created after the ravages of war. Two wars really. The U.N. was created after World War II. But after World War I, the League of Nations was tried but failed. You can say the idea of a world body, created after the war whose work was to end all wars, has always been there after the horrors of a world war.

The institution that was created was unique. Its membership was open to all nations, and the basis of the membership was equality. But the custodian of power resided in the hands of the Security Council of which five members are Permanent: U.S., U.K., Russia (Soviet Union), France and China known as the P5 and an elected 10 other members for two terms of two years referred to as the E10.

Upon its creation, the United Nation's primary role was the maintenance of peace and stability. The United Nations is an international forum that sets norms, principles of international behavior, rules, and conventions. It upholds treaties and international law. It is a court of appeal of the first resort and last resort of states that are targets of aggressive states. Small states need the U.N. New states need the U.N. It is at the U.N. that new states are legitimized. They take their first bow and gain recognition as a state. And their sovereignty is recognized in the principle of each country, an equal vote. But big states need the U.N. too. The U.S. needs the U.N. because the U.S. has truly global interests, all of which cannot be handled by the U.S. alone. The U.S. uses the U.N. as an instrument of its foreign policy. The U.S. uses the U.N. to legitimize its foreign policy actions.

The U.N. has now come to be appreciated for the following roles:

■ First, as a Peace Agent: Peace Maker, Peace Builder, Peace Keeper. Today this role has expanded to include "nation-building."

Yet the external security environment is crucial to our development and survival. If the environment is hostile, it affects global trade and the economy and hence affects Singapore. This is why we subscribe to the U.N.'s fundamental objectives to "maintain international peace and security" to "develop friendly relations among nations and to achieve international cooperation."

■ Second, as a Humanitarian Agent: taking up human rights issues and delivering food and aid in crisis to refugees. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights undertake these tasks. Rudd Lubbers is the UNHCR and Sergio de Mello was the last UNHCHR before he went to Iraq. The work of UNAIDS falls under this category.

■ Third, as a Development Agent: in its economic and social work. Examples of agencies that carry out this work are the U.N. Development Program (UNDP), U.N. Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), U.N. Environment Program (UNEP), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N. (FAO).

The U.N. also carries some myths that should be set straight from the start.

Myth No 1

(a) All members are equal. This is clearly not so. Brian Urquhart, the respected Undersecretary General once described the U.N. as being made up of Lions and Lambs. P5 are the Lions. The rest are Lambs. But even then not all P5s are equal. There is P1 — the U.S. The end of Cold War has seen the predominance of the U.S. and this is clear in the U.N. Security Council (UNSC). The U.K. and France usually go along with the U.S. while Russia and China are subdued these days. The Elected 10 hold office for two years each and are considered "tourists" by some of the P5 members.

Singapore

Singapore is a small island state, about 250 square miles at low tide. It has no natural resources, except for a population of 4 million. Singapore was born amidst conflict. The separation from Malaysia took place in 1965. At the same time Indonesians still had its policy of confrontation against Malaysia and Singapore. Our population is 75 percent ethnic Chinese, 15 percent Malay/Muslims, eight percent Indian. Singapore is located amidst larger and relatively poorer neighbors, with different systems of governance and beliefs. We need a secure environment to survive. We need to ensure physical security from external threats, economic security and internal security.

The U.N. is vitally important to Singapore. Singapore can do a lot about internal management but the external environment is beyond our control. Yet the external security environment is crucial to our development and survival. If the environment is hostile, it affects global trade and the economy and

Indeed, the main issues for many at the U.N. is U.S. unilateralism. Then there are countries like India, Japan, Canada and Mexico, which have an importance and weight. India, on matters around its region. Japan, for economic and social assistance because of its financial power. Canada is important on peacekeeping questions and the Nordic countries for disarmament.

Myth No 2

(b) The U.N. is most effective when P5 are united or are in complete agreement. The answer is yes up to a point. The years 1989-1992 were the high point of the U.N. But frankly, for non-P5 states, if the P5 gang up, the great powers will dominate and the smaller and medium-sized states may find that the big power interests will prevail against the interests of all other members.

Myth No 3

(c) All issues can be brought up before the UNSC. But no issue of dispute involving the deep interests of the P5 will be brought up before the Security Council. They will prevent discussion. They can use their veto to prevent resolutions from being passed.

I have so far dealt with general statements giving you some key insights into the U.N. and its operation. Let me share with you some specifics from the point of view of a small state operating at the U.N. so that you can better understand how the U.N. works and the value of the U.N. to a member state. Singapore was also privileged to be a member of the UNSC for Y2000 – Y2001.

hence affects Singapore. This is why we subscribe to the U.N.'s fundamental objectives to "maintain international peace and security" to "develop friendly relations among nations and to achieve international cooperation." As a small state we need the U.N. to uphold the principle of sovereign equality and that actions of aggression of a big state against the sovereignty of a small state must be rolled back.

We support the U.N.'s rule-making role and norm-setting role. In the post-Cold War world you will hear much murmuring about norm-setting being more the imposition of a point of view rather than persuasion. Initially, there were many complaints about the U.S. and Europe, i.e. the developed world, about the arrogance of their worldview after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These Western countries tried to impose their views of human rights and governance in an all-or-nothing fashion on the other U.N. members, to the discomfort and chagrin of the other nations.

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How Singapore works

The name of the game in the U.N. is networking. It is mobilizing and winning support for the vote when you need it. Singapore is a small state and hence needs to leverage itself. Thus, Singapore works with others.

The groupings or networks Singapore belongs to are many and important: Singapore is first of all a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Singapore is a member of the Forum of Small States (FOSS). We are the Chairman of this grouping. In fact, this was our initiative. Small states in this Forum are defined as countries having a population

of less than 10 million. The FOSS discusses issues of importance to small states. It may surprise you to know that 124 small states are members in the U.N. by this definition. In other words, more than half of the U.N. are small states. Singapore is also a member of the Association of Small Island States: AOSIS — its objectives include discussing the environment and sustainable development. Singapore is in G77 and NAM. We play a moderate role in G77 and NAM. We are seen as a bridge between the developed countries and the developing countries.

Issues for Singapore

Cambodia

For the Cambodian issue, which was before the U.N. from 1978 to 1998, Singapore worked with ASEAN, then six countries, to galvanize support to force Vietnam, which had marched into Cambodia in 1978 in an act of aggression, to withdraw and to agree to a comprehensive political settlement. In our view, Hun Sen, the Vietnamese installed government in Phnom Penh, had to go. ASEAN helped free Cambodia of Vietnamese occupation. Singapore played a very active role in this campaign. Finally, Vietnam did withdraw and agreed to a comprehensive political settlement with the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) managing its transition. Today, it is a success story.

Kuwait

A major issue for us was when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Singapore took a strong stand on Kuwait's side. We were a member of the Coalition of the Willing. We saw the analogy of a big state marching into a small state. Singapore felt solidarity with Kuwait. We have always been tough on Iraq and sanctions, and insisted Iraq must comply with 13 resolutions of the U.N.

East Timor

The conflict in East Timor was considered by Indonesia to be a domestic issue. In ASEAN, member states abide by the principle of non-interference. It was difficult for any of the ASEAN members to discuss the violence in East Timor. After the referendum and East Timor's vote for independence, massive violence ensued. The scale of violence was both shocking and alarming. Finally, Indonesian President Habibie agreed to seek help from the U.N. It was only after Indonesia's decision to turn to the U.N. that Australia, Singapore, Thailand, New Zealand, Malaysia, Fiji — the Coalition of the Willing working with a U.N.

mandate — took up the peacekeeping in East Timor. The U.N. now prefers this approach for peace building and peacekeeping. The approach is firstly to find a coalition of the willing of regional players, then secondly to endow them with a U.N. mandate. This was what happened in East Timor. Singapore was in the first wave going to East Timor. In the first phase, the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) went in to help stop the violence and keep the peace. The U.N. Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) saw through the elections and nation-building. Today the U.N. Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISSET) for peacekeeping has a mandate till April 2004.

Iraq

Singapore supported the U.S. in U.N. Security Council resolution 1441. We are a member of the Coalition for the Immediate Disarmament of Iraq. Singapore sent 32 police trainers to Iraq for five weeks. They trained 1,000 Iraqi police and some of their trainers. Currently we have sent 192 men to the Arabian Sea area. They fly the C130 and man the Landing Ship Tank (LST). Resolution 1511 established a multilateral force, but it came too late. Still it gives a mandate to create a force separate from the U.S. and the U.K. Singapore's position on Iraq is strong because of the principle against aggression in the first Gulf War. We believe the U.S. must stay the course in Iraq. It would be terrible if the U.S. loses.

I have enumerated on the peace and security issues that Singapore pays special attention to. Singapore is also active on other issues of value to our society.

One such example is the issue of the Death Penalty. The European Union took the lead to abolish the death penalty at the U.N. After the Cold War, values were fought out in the U.N. Human Rights and Democracy were key battleground areas.

Thirty-two states in the U.S. have the death penalty. Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and India are countries among others that have the death penalty. We have fought for the principle that each society decides for itself. We have argued that the death penalty is not a Human Rights issue but of

law and punishment. We have also taken a stand on cloning. Singapore is against human cloning but supports therapeutic cloning. We believe it is important for saving mankind from certain life threatening diseases. The U.S. opposes even therapeutic cloning.

UN Security Council Experience

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We joined the UNSC to complete our experience. It has been a long wait. That was the first time we ran for a seat on UNSC 2000-2001. Singapore became one of the elected 10. What important lessons did we learn from this? Let me share our insights with you.

(i) UNSC is not a rules-based body that responds to principles or to the merits of the case. Prevailing interests of the U.N. Security Council members, especially P5 members, will determine the Council's response. International disputes involving P5 will find it difficult to see light of day as a UNSC resolution. The UNSC is also an inherently passive institution that does not react automatically or consistently to conflicts. For member states that have a dispute, the question is how to bring up the issue.

(ii) The UNSC is clearly dominated by the U.S. The U.S. uses it as an instrument of its foreign policy. Where the UNSC does not bend with the U.S., the U.S. bypasses it as seen in the case of Iraq. In the 1441 Resolution, the UNSC voted to support the U.S. The second resolution did not garner the requisite votes. So the U.S. did not go to the UNSC. The U.S. went to Iraq without the U.N. Many felt the U.N. was poorer for it, weakened by being bypassed. The U.N. was marginalized, but the U.S. obtained Resolution 1511. Since 9/11 the U.S. has gotten many of its actions supported by U.N. counter-terrorism measures. There have been 11 or 13 Counter Terrorism resolutions. The U.S. does not concede ground but gets its way.

(iii) Only on Middle East issues is the U.S. challenged. On such resolutions Singapore decides on the merits of the case.

Through the different issues, a reaffirmation of what Singapore stands for as a global citizen takes place. Singapore does not take up many issues. We prefer to choose our fights. Otherwise, we try our best to be a good and responsible U.N. member so that our record will speak for us. Should the day come when we have to go to the U.N. with an issue or to the Court of Appeals, hopefully others may remember us as a principled nation. That we have come to the U.N. to ask that the U.N. uphold its principles as we have upheld them as a member.

Finally, since I am addressing an American audience, but finally too, as this is an important point, let me conclude by saying U.S. global primacy means the future of the U.N. after Iraq hangs much on U.S. participation and support for the world body. The future of the U.N. also depends on whether other countries want to make it work. The UNSC needs the U.S. to play a meaningful role in world affairs. We hope that after Iraq the great powers will come together in the spirit of compromise to make the world body work.

And you, as American citizens and world citizens, as you grow in your careers, I hope you will develop a better understanding and appreciation of multilateral diplomacy and multilateralism.

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