

Mr. Obama goes to New York

**The President and the Restoration of
Multilateral Diplomacy**

An MGI Summitry Report

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Summary

As President Obama travels to the UN and G20 summits, the authors review his efforts to restore U.S. leadership in multilateral forums to date. They conclude that:

- The President has been a successful “quiet international reformer”, managing the process of bringing the emerging powers into global negotiating fora.
- Mr. Obama and his aides also articulated an internationalist philosophy that does not shy away from difficult but necessary “painstaking, principled diplomacy”.
- The administration has taken major steps to restore America’s stature at the UN, especially among developing countries, and launched new initiatives on human rights and peacekeeping.
- Nonetheless, the president has also been rebuffed by China and India over climate change at the G8; and by Russia on Georgia and Iran in the UN Security Council.
- The President’s desire for a stronger role at the UN will inevitably lead to calls for him to state America’s position on Security Council reform.

Introduction

For four days next week, President Obama will place himself squarely at the center of multilateral diplomacy. On 22 September he will participate in the UN Secretary-General’s climate summit in New York, and host meetings involving African countries and troop contributors to UN peacekeeping. On 23 September, he will address over 100 international leaders at the opening of the new session of the UN General Assembly. The next day he chairs a special summit session of the Security Council on nuclear proliferation. The scene then moves to Pittsburgh, where President Obama is hosting G20 heads of government to discuss their responses to the financial crisis.

The President can expect a warm public reception in all of these forums. While he has already spent a good deal of time with other leaders – most notably in London and Italy at the G20 and G8 summits – his appearance at the UN will still have symbolic power. Many of those present will recall George Bush’s 2002 warning to the General Assembly that the UN might prove “irrelevant” over Iraq.¹ President Obama can finally lay that ghost to rest. The combination of his internationalist bent and pent-up demand for a visible return of the U.S. to the UN all but guarantees a near-rapturous reception to his speech.

But, as the President and his aides are aware, he will have to back up his speech in New York with sustained diplomacy to address the many deep flaws in the multilateral system.

Over the last decade, in the absence of U.S. leadership, the UN has grown increasingly fractious and confrontational. In the Security Council, China and Russia have repeatedly blocked U.S. initiatives on crises from Darfur to Burma, with the support from elected members like South Africa. In the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council in Geneva, American allies like India and Egypt undermine Western initiatives on human rights.ⁱⁱ Mr. Obama's aides are under no illusions about the scale of these problems. In a speech this August, U.S. ambassador to the UN Susan Rice argued that "real change can only come from painstaking, principled diplomacy":

It will not be easy. It will not be quick. But let's remember the words of a University president who once said, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Well, if you think engagement is imperfect, try isolation.ⁱⁱⁱ

So the President's quick-fire meetings this month are the prelude to more protracted discussions. In the near term, this will involve an unusual number of international conferences – in the next two years, there are major UN summits on climate change (in December), the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Millennium Development Goals (both next year), along with a review of the Peacebuilding Commission. A smaller-scale but likely divisive review of the Human Rights Council looms in 2011.

Protracted, painstaking diplomacy is not an easy political sell. But the challenge before the administration is further complicated by structural problems in the international system. President Obama cannot simply reinvigorate multilateralism by returning to the UN.

Since the end of the Cold War, international decision-making has grown ever more diffuse, as regional organizations and *ad hoc* bodies like the G20 and G8 have gained influence. Even UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon admits that while "the United Nations has become one of the global players, it's not the only one."^{iv} This diffusion of responsibility is often technically necessary, but can complicate talks on important issues. Climate change diplomacy overseen by the UN is, for example, largely disconnected from the international financial institutions and World Trade Organization.^v That makes planning for a low-carbon global economy even harder.

And while rich countries have pounced on the G20 as the best mechanism to respond to the financial crisis, developing countries are deeply suspicious of this newly powerful club. A lot of diplomatic time was chewed up this summer by ill-tempered (and largely fruitless) efforts by developing countries in the General Assembly to assert their right to be consulted on decisions that would deeply affect their economies.

President Obama's packed September schedule reflects the confused state of multilateral diplomacy today. By engaging with the General Assembly, Security Council and G20 back-to-back, the President is trying to show that he takes all the forums seriously, and looks set to pull off an impressive balancing act.

What's on the agenda?

In spite of the high profile and political symbolism of this September's meetings, none are expected to produce landmark declarations or policy decisions in their own right:

** At the **General Assembly** President Obama is likely to emphasize the need for progress towards a climate change deal this December in Copenhagen, and underline his commitment to a nuclear-free world. Also expect an emphasis on economic development, alongside a vision of international cooperation based on states living up to their responsibilities.*

Some commentators expect an announcement on the Middle East peace process, but the President will want to balance this (if it happens) by underlining his global priorities. European leaders are likely to emphasize Afghanistan. Professional UN-watchers will be waiting for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chavez to speak, to see if they are as critical of the U.S. as in previous years (Chavez once compared George Bush to Satan).

** In the **Security Council**, the President will press fellow heads of government to build momentum towards the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference in 2010. The last NPT review conference in 2005 ended without any agreement, and the President (like many outside experts) knows that this may be the last chance to revitalize the nuclear regime. The session will also be used to reinvigorate other non-proliferation mechanisms.*

** At the **G20**, heads of government will review progress on commitments made at their last meeting in London – including on redistributing voting rights at the International Monetary Fund. Suggestions by France and Germany to agree limits on financiers' bonuses have been dropped. U.S. officials will be watching the meeting closely to decide whether the G20 will continue to be a useful forum as the financial crisis recedes.*

This may work for now. But over time, other leaders will start to probe President Obama's attitude to international institutions in more depth. Does he see the G20 as useful but temporary mechanism for responding to the current crisis, or a more permanent forum for directing the global economy? Does he believe that the Security Council is sustainable in its current composition (which gives Western Europe alone more seats than Asia)? Does he really care about the General Assembly, loaded down by a plethora of small countries?

The President won't answer these questions straight away. But he knows that they need answering. He told Russian students this summer that there are no "clear answers" to the question "What world order will replace the Cold War?"^{vi} But as this briefing outlines, the President and his team have started to lay out their vision of world order – and to put it into practice at the G20 and the UN. They have not yet addressed the hardest institutional questions, like Security Council reform, in public. But the rapidity of their early engagement suggests that they will not dodge those hard questions forever.

Barack Obama: quiet international reformer

Next week's round of engagements is consistent with the President's clear commitment to international cooperation since taking office, which has been even greater than foreign policy analysts predicted. He has turned to the United Nations and G20 to address nuclear proliferation, climate change and the recession. Unlike George W. Bush - who accepted the need to work through the UN in his second term but showed little love for it - Mr. Obama has emphasized his *personal* investment in multilateral negotiations. He surprised his counterparts at the G20 summit in London by taking responsibility for the financial crisis.^{vii} In deciding to chair a Summit-level meeting of the UN Security Council he will become the first US President ever to do so.^{viii} He has also made it clear that reinforcing the nuclear non-proliferation regime is not merely a matter of policy, but a private concern stretching back decades.

Beyond these gestures, the President has publicly articulated an internationalist philosophy. "Given our interdependence," he told his audience in Cairo in June, "any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail."^{ix} In Moscow in July, he called for a "system where we hold ourselves to the same standards that we apply to other nations, with clear rights and responsibilities for all."^x

If the President has taken political risks to make multilateralism work, other leaders have not always responded in kind. The administration's efforts to work through NATO on Afghanistan have been met with only token offers of extra troops from Europe. Invited to the G8, China and India voiced doubts about the U.S. position on climate change.^{xi} Russia vetoed the presence of UN peacekeepers in Georgia and has not fundamentally altered its approach on Iran in the Security Council.

In all these cases, there has been a striking disconnect between the President's internationalist instincts and his interlocutors' emphasis on narrowly national interests. The U.S. also pulled out of April's UN Durban Review Conference on racism, on the grounds that the proposed outcome document was implicitly anti-Israeli. Nonetheless, the new administration's close engagement in the run-up to the conference ensured that the text was far more moderate than earlier drafts.

Beyond the UN, the Obama administration has acted as midwife to fundamental – if as yet poorly understood – changes in the international system. Its emphasis on economic crisis management through the G20, and especially the decision to host the Pittsburgh summit, has validated the emerging economies' formal inclusion in the top level of economic governance. Mr. Obama has also called for a variant of the G20 to deal with nuclear issues. In March, he launched the Major Economies Forum (which similarly overlaps with the G20) on climate change.

The U.S. benefits from advocating these bodies. It is set to chair not only the Pittsburgh G20 (and is critical to G20 management even when other countries host), but also the Major Economies Forum and nuclear G20. Through these mechanisms, Mr. Obama reinforces the

centrality of the United States while gaining support by welcoming the emerging powers at the world's top tables.

This balancing of U.S. interests and rising nations is indicative of the pragmatic dimension of the administration's approach to international institutions. While the President emphasizes the need for "rights and responsibilities", he and his closest colleagues are also aware of the need to deal with the changing international balance of power as it is – not as they would like it to be.

And his team is aware that supporting international order necessarily means reforming its primary institutions, even if those reforms are sometimes uncomfortable. As President Obama himself has written:

...for every UN agency like UNICEF that functions well, there are others that seem to do little more than hold conferences and produce reports. But these failures aren't an argument for reducing our involvement in international organizations, nor are they an excuse for U.S. unilateralism. The more effective UN peacekeeping forces are in handling civil wars and sectarian conflicts, the less policing we have to do in areas that we'd like to see stabilized. The more credible the information that the International Atomic Energy Agency provides, the more likely we are to mobilize allies against the efforts of rogue states to obtain nuclear weapons. The greater the capacity of the WHO, the less likely we are to have to deal with a flu pandemic in our own country. No country has a bigger stake than we do in strengthening international institutions – which is why we pushed for their creation in the first place, and why we need to take the lead in improving them.^{xiii}

The reform agenda is not limited to the UN. U.S. engagement with the G20 has accelerated movement towards the end of the old G8. The U.S. played an instrumental role in saving this year's G8 summit in Italy from irrelevance, initiating headline discussions on food security and climate change. But the President's aides were explicit that it was only "a midpoint between the London G20 summit and the Pittsburgh G20 summit".^{xiii} European leaders took the hint: Nicolas Sarkozy told French ambassadors in August that expanding the G8 to a G14 was now a French priority.^{xiv}

The gradual transition from the G8 to a larger forum was probably inevitable – after all, George Bush hosted the G20 in December 2008. It has been championed by U.S. allies like Australia and Great Britain. But the administration scored a quiet success in creating conditions for its European partners to move away from the G8 without any loss of face.

But, as noted above, promoting the G20 has risked alienating the vast majority of countries that do not attend its deliberations. In purely economic terms, that doesn't matter very much: the G20 members account for some 90% of the global economy. But it does affect non-G20 governments' views on human rights and international security.

Many U.S. allies, from Nigeria to Pakistan and the Philippines, do not attend the G20. If they feel excluded, the U.S. may find it harder to secure support in forums like the UN. This is particularly sensitive at present, as the U.S. and its allies are trying to build international consensus around climate change before December's Copenhagen summit and undo the erosion of western positions in the UN's Human Rights Council.

The President knows this is a problem. He said as much on his visit to Ghana in July, admitting that G8 and G20 conferences needed streamlining, but that they "fill a gap" left by dysfunctional UN negotiations.^{xv} He argued that the UN, too, needs reform.

So the President goes to New York with an established if understated track record of guiding multilateral cooperation through the financial crisis - and a confirmed desire to start altering the way that the UN works too. He and his team have begun to lay out a twin-track approach to restoring America's place in the UN after the Bush years.

A twin-track strategy at the UN

Efforts to improve the UN always face the problem that the organization serves three fundamentally different purposes. It remains the primary forum for many developing countries to talk about security, human rights and their economic needs. But it also plays an essential role in big power diplomacy between the U.S., Russia and (an increasingly assertive) China, especially on nuclear issues. Finally, the UN is a permanent fall-back option for tough international problems, charged with handling issues from climate change to piracy.

Unlike the G8 and G20, the UN simply cannot be redirected to focus on individual crises. Its combination of often contradictory priorities makes laying out clear proposals for making the institution work better almost impossible. John Bolton, George Bush's controversial UN ambassador, expressed deep frustration that he had to spend more time in the Security Council talking about African conflicts rather than Iran and North Korea.^{xvi} President Obama's aides recognize that they need to address both at once.

This isn't just a matter of altruism towards less developed countries. The UN's budgetary structures give poorer states opportunities to paralyze its activities. They are also able to dominate human rights debates in New York and Geneva. The Bush administration neglected this political reality, launching management reform and human rights initiatives that succeeded only in reinforcing anti-U.S. coalitions. If the U.S. is serious about promoting an international culture of "rights and responsibilities" it cannot ignore those debates. China and Russia are adept at marshalling large numbers of smaller countries to support their positions at the UN - the U.S. needs to match this.

President Obama's personal commitment to tackling nuclear proliferation will be a decisive factor in shaping the administration's attitude to the UN throughout his term. His decision to chair next week's Security Council session on the subject risks accusations of focusing on

big power diplomacy over the needs of poorer UN members. But the President's team has made a determined effort to address the latter's concerns.

The administration has engaged in human rights talks that its predecessors boycotted – and won election to the Human Rights Council with 90% support from other UN members. It has agreed to pay \$2 billion in UN dues withheld under the Bush administration, and offered personnel and equipment to UN peacekeeping missions. Speaking in August, Susan Rice noted that her first priority (unsurprisingly) remains “America's core security interests.” But she added that it was “smart diplomacy” to build “constructive relationships with countries large and small”:

We will work with the vast majority of countries on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect and we will do so to bridge old divides, resisting the efforts of a handful to spoil shared progress. The rifts between North and South are almost as outdated as those between East and West. Yet there's still a widespread perception at the UN that the North cares only about security, and the South cares only about development. But such truisms ignore a central truth: there can be no security without development; and there can be no sustained development without security. These old-school rifts belie today's realities. Our fates are not opposed; they are intertwined.^{xvii}

President Obama is likely to use very similar rhetoric to the General Assembly. It arguably serves a dual purpose: reassuring developing countries that the U.S. will not only reach out beyond the Security Council, but also understands there is an economic world beyond the G20. But while Mr. Obama starts to rebuild bridges with the General Assembly, one question will hover in the background: Security Council reform.

The Security Council problem

Working through both the UN Security Council and the General Assembly may improve the diplomatic mood in New York, but does not remove the need to address the state of the Security Council. It is commonplace that the Council's membership must be overhauled to match today's balance of power, but there is no agreement as to how.

India, Japan, Germany and Brazil all claim that they should have permanent seats on a reformed Council. Japan and Germany point to the fact that they are, respectively, the number two and number three financial contributors to the UN's budget and stress the issue of ‘taxation without representation.’ India and Brazil highlight their economic weight and populations, the relative under-representation of their regions in the Security Council's permanent club, and their growing power.

China remains opposed to any reform that would give either India or Japan permanent seats (Russia also isn't keen). Although there are alternatives – like giving the aspirants “semi-permanent” seats – none commands full consensus. The question of who would represent

Africa in an expanded Security Council remains a near-insuperable problem. President Obama may refer to UN reform in general terms next week, but is unlikely to go into specifics. Yet if the administration postpones the issue indefinitely, it will not only affect UN diplomacy but may cause India and Brazil to exploit their places in the G20 to create extra pressure for places in the Council. And if the U.S. does not take the lead in shaping the discussions, it may well find itself confronted by others proposals – and then either have to accept sub-optimal outcomes or pay the diplomatic price of scuppering reforms. Security Council reform may be very difficult – yet in the long run, ignoring it may destabilize multilateral diplomacy more generally.

But for now, President Obama can be relatively satisfied that he and his administration have done a good job of triangulating between the G20, Security Council and General Assembly. He has yet to tie these advances to a fuller vision of world order, though it was arguably impossible to do so until the turmoil of the financial crisis had calmed down. And the Summit diplomacy leading to the Copenhagen climate conference in December 2009 looks set to be ugly. In short: in just eight months, the President has restored America as a leader in multilateral diplomacy – but this has only been the prelude to the diplomatic challenges lying ahead.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ “Statement by President Bush, UN General Assembly”, 12 September 2002. Available at <http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/57/statements/020912usaE.htm>.
- ⁱⁱ See Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner, *The EU and Human Rights at the UN – 2009 Update* (European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2009).
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- ^v Alex Evans and David Steven, *An Institutional Architecture for Climate Change* (Center on International Cooperation, March 2009), p32.
- ^{vi} “Obama’s Speech in Moscow: President Addresses New Economic School Graduation”, 7 July 2009. At <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/July/20090707062839abretnuh3.549922e-02.html>.
- ^{vii} Marc Hujer, “I Take Responsibility: Obama’s G20 Confession”, Spiegel Online, 4 June 2009. Available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,617639,00.html>.
- ^{viii} The Security Council has only met in Summit format (i.e. attended by heads of state) five times since its creation in 1945.
- ^{ix} “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning, Cairo University”, 4 June 2009. Available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/.
- ^x See note vi.
- ^{xi} James Kirkup, “G8 Summit: China and India Reject G8 Calls for Climate Talks”, *Daily Telegraph* (UK), 8 July 2009.
- ^{xii} Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*.
- ^{xiii} Peter Baker and Rachel Donadio, “G-8 Not Enough, Say Outsiders Wanting In”, *New York Times*, 10 July 2009.
- ^{xiv} See http://www.elysee.fr/documents/index.php?mode=cvview&cat_id=7&press_id=2850&lang=fr.
- ^{xv} “Obama Lands in Ghana After Meeting Pope”, *Associated Press*, 10 July 2009. Available at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31842856/ns/world_news-europe/.
- ^{xvi} John Bolton, *Surrender in Not An Option* (New York: Threshold Books, 2007), p342.
- ^{xvii} See note iii.