

Can Brazil Save the United Nations?

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The United Nations is a twentieth century body struggling with twenty-first century problems. Climate change, transnational terrorism, AIDS, mass atrocities, poverty and piracy – these are all what former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan described as “problems without passports.” They require fresh thinking and global partnership. A weary UN will be unable to adequately confront them with frayed diplomatic and institutional tools.

Saying there is a need to reform the UN is about as controversial as declaring that global poverty is unedifying. And yet meaningful reform remains elusive. Those who seek an extreme makeover for the world body tend to focus upon the permanent membership of the Security Council, the post-World War Two guarantor of international peace and security.

In the sixty-eight year history of the UN, Brazil has spent twenty years on the Security Council. Only Japan has been elected as many times. This experience, coupled with Brazil’s undeniable economic ascendancy, supports its claim for a permanent seat. In the words of Foreign Minister, Antonio Patriota, for the first time in Brazil’s history it is “a country of global reach” and the Security Council needs to “get up to date” with twenty-first century realities.

But qualification for permanent membership has to be more than a population head count, a GDP measurement or an index of UN financial contribution. The key question is how will changing the Security Council improve how it operates?

Brazil’s campaign for permanent membership must project a vision of the UN in the twenty-first century that is about enhancing universal human rights and confronting global problems. These are not fringe concerns. The promotion of human rights is fundamental to Brazilian foreign policy and is enshrined in Articles 1 and 55 of the UN Charter. Function may follow form, but at the moment the debate on Security Council reform lacks acuity.

In this context Brazil’s support for the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) could prove crucial. First adopted during the UN World Summit in 2005, the largest meeting of heads of state and government ever assembled, R2P commits all governments of the world to protecting their people from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Although primarily a preventive doctrine, R2P also allows for coercive measures if a state is manifestly “unwilling or unable” to protect its people from mass atrocities.

R2P has played an important role in Cote d’Ivoire, South Sudan, Kenya and elsewhere. However, in the aftermath of the controversial 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya, Brazil led the UN debate about how to protect civilians without lurching towards “regime change.” Brazil’s argument that intervening powers also have a “responsibility while protecting” has not helped mobilize the divided Security Council with regard to Syria, but it has raised important questions about the methodology and motivations of civilian protection operations.

To ignite a debate is not enough. Brazil should actively support the Accountability, Coherency and Transparency (ACT) diplomatic initiative of Switzerland and others. Of particular importance is their recommendation that the permanent members of the Security Council should not use their veto in mass atrocity situations. It may come too late to save the people of Syria, but this will not be the last time the Security Council has to face a situation where one of its permanent members is the ally of a brutal regime intent on murdering its own people.

It would also be a mistake to underestimate the emerging power of civil society with regard to UN reform. Once marginal players in global politics, the top dozen NGOs now have a combined budget of approximately \$US3 billion and employ thousands of humanitarian and human rights workers. The most professional organizations, like Human Rights Watch or Medicines Sans Frontiers, can be powerful allies.

Over the last decade civil society, working with committed governments, have mobilized global public opinion for three seemingly impossible achievements. The first of these, the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, led to the prohibition of landmines that murder and maim civilians and soldiers alike. Similarly, the 2002 formation of the International Criminal Court and the recent adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty were both the result of campaigning partnerships between the UN, governments and civil society.

A better world and a reformed UN are both possible, but it will require grit and determination to achieve either. If Brazil truly aspires to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council it must lead the change that it desires.

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