

UN Missed the Chance of a Lifetime

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Last month's United Nations world summit could have been a turning point for international relations. After years of effort by outside experts and inside reformers, world leaders had on the table a blueprint for bringing the 60-year-old UN into contemporary relevance. The draft proposal included bold reforms on a remarkable range of issues, from poverty and development, to international security, to the UN's internal management.

But the final outcome was hugely disappointing. World leaders failed to grasp the historic opportunity before them, and both the UN and the world are worse off for it.

The summit's few bright spots should be acknowledged. Diplomats finally agreed to recognize the world's shared responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. While the first line of responsibility is clearly with the state to protect its own civilians, when national authorities manifestly fail to do so, the international community now accepts that obligation and has agreed to back it up with collective action — using all peaceful means where possible and force if necessary.

Another positive result from the summit in New York was the establishment of a new Peacebuilding Commission, a dedicated institution to address the needs of nations in, and emerging from, conflict. If the new intergovernmental body can “bring together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peace building and recovery,” it should speed the renewal of shattered societies in future.

A third success was to agree on major new resources for the Human Rights Commissioner and, in principle, on some replacement for the totally dysfunctional Commission on Human Rights.

But on the toughest peace and security issues, the summit failed miserably.

Security Council reform disappeared when no compromise could be reached to change the composition of the body to greater reflect the world as it is today rather than the world as it was 60 years ago.

And while world leaders condemned terrorism — as with condemning sin, not difficult — they failed to define it unambiguously as meaning politically motivated violence against civilians. Outlawing this without qualifications for “wars of liberation” or anything else would have sent a very clear message to communities all over the world.

At least the word “terrorism” appeared in the final document at the summit. That is more than can be said for the words “non-proliferation” and “disarmament.”

There was no sign whatsoever of such key security issues as nuclear testing, new weapons programs or production of fissile material. Nobody could even begin to agree on action either on the supply side (to constrain the availability of material and technology) or the demand side (to reduce the motivation for acquiring weapons of mass destruction). The failure even to begin finding a new consensus on these issues is potentially quite disastrous, bringing closer a new cascade of proliferation.

It was always going to be a hard slog to get so many diverse countries with such varied interests to agree to take so many historic decisions all at once. But that doesn't explain why some difficult reforms survived to the final draft while others didn't.

Simple, strong leadership was the deciding factor in many cases. Right up to the end, most major capitals never really took responsibility for the process. They left it to their diplomats in New York, who are comfortable with old-think, prone to infighting and always comfortable sheltering behind the “need for consensus.”

On the two or three issues where some capitals really weighed in, however, there were worthwhile results. Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, for example, pushed the “responsibility to protect” issue, and that tipped the balance in favour of strong final wording. On issues where no such leader provided personal backing, the wording slipped, sometimes right out of the document entirely.

Picking up the pieces after New York to renew efforts to find agreement on essential matters of world security will mean finding leaders willing to face up to the seriousness of the challenges we face. Don't hold your breath.