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The Political Structure of the United Nations

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Among the stresses and strains attendant on representing the United States at the United Nations, none is more persistent than sitting for hours on end at the UN Security Council and listening to the venomous rhetoric and vituperation that is routinely heaped there on the United States and on the democratic West generally—and that passes in that "august body" for rational debate. The issues that come before the Security Council often are serious indeed. The proceedings, rarely so—insofar as "serious" is to be equated with germane, based on fact, and to a substantial degree dispassionate.

The more productively to while away some of those endless hours, I sometimes propounded tough questions for myself, questions closely related to the nature and quality of the proceedings. (Some of my colleagues on the Council preferred to read newspapers or official cables, or to sign correspondence, or even to snooze—all of which forms of time-passing I rejected as undignified, unbecoming the representative of a great power, or quite simply as too ostentatious a display of contempt, however well-deserved, for the Security Council and for the United Nations system as a whole.) So, as an alternative way of keeping my wits about me, I chose to propound puzzlers, two in particular. One question was, do the Soviets believe a word that I, or any of the other U.S. representatives, might be saying? And the second question, even more intriguing to me: do they believe a word that they are saying?

These are more serious questions than you might at first suppose. The answers to them should shed some light on the character of the UN generally, and on the quality of the business that is done there these days—as well as the dangers that doing any business at all in such a forum may create for the
U.S. and the West.

I tend to think that, yes, the Soviets do more or less believe what they hear us saying. Not believe, to be sure, in the sense of acceptance or of willingness to enter into a genuine debate about the issues that might be involved, and certainly not believe in the sense of setting the groundrules for Germaneness to these issues. But they listen. They listen carefully, and the more so as they began to understand during the three years I spent at the UN with Ambassador Kirkpatrick that the U.S. foreign policy and not simply playing word games. They listen. And they receive important information, important messages both about the principles basic to U.S. foreign policy and the implementation of that principled foreign policy to specific situations. That certainly seemed to me to be the case throughout the summer and early fall of 1982 when, to an unusual degree, U.S. policy concerning the war in Lebanon was being articulated in the course of virtually nonstop Security Council deliberations, most of them held in camera in what at the UN are called "informal consultations"—deliberations in which only the 15 Council members are present (along with key Secretariat staff), closed to non-members, closed to the public and the press. The U.S. did not approve of Israel's action in Lebanon. But neither did we intend, as the situation on the ground evolved, to let the Soviets or the Syrians or the PLO use that disapproval as a wedge to split the U.S. and Israel from their common pursuit of a comprehensive peace settlement in the middle East, or from their common desire to assist in the recreation of an independent and autonomous Lebanon—and certainly we did not intend to let the PLO snatch victory from the jaws of a devastating defeat. To this extent, we used the Security Council. We used it to define and to refine U.S. policy in the Middle East—and, yes, the Soviets listened and believed and got the message.

On the second question, I think the answer is "sometimes": yes, the Soviets believe what they are saying and, no, they do not—but the important point is that, either way, it doesn't make a whole lot of difference. The objective for them, in the UN as in all public forums, is not "addressing reality" or "hewing to the facts" or "seeking viable solutions to situations of conflict" in ways that would make sense to us in the West. They say and do what, in the judgment of their government, has to be said and done in order to make effective use of the opportunities provided for them by the UN Security Council, among all the forums available to them.
Certainly nothing that I observe in the three years that I did business with the Soviets in the Security Council suggested to me that they had any interest in fulfilling the purposes of the United Nations as enunciated in the Charter, or in engaging in serious debate on issues of substance, or even—except in the grossest sense—in articulating the objectives of the foreign policy.

When in September of 1983, for example, Korean Air Line's flight 7 was shot down, the Soviet representatives in the Security Council at first even denied that the incident had occurred, (or that they knew that some airliner had suffered an untimely fate). Only later on, when not even they could deny the evidence of audiotapes of the voices of Soviet pilots engaged in firing rockets at the straying civilian aircraft, did they fall back on the defense of "protecting sovereign Soviet territory" from a U.S.-directed "spy" mission. Facts and documentary evidence notwithstanding, the Soviet representatives in the Security Council simply receive the official "line", repeat it with little embellishment, and stick to it. In the annual General Assembly debate on Afghanistan, the Soviets pay not the slightest heed to massive documentation and eyewitness accounts of vicious depredations committed by Soviet occupation forces against civilian targets and the basic national infrastructure: they stick, rather, to the official "line" that the Soviets are merely resisting foreign aggression (U.S.-sponsored, U.S.-supported), arm-in-arm with the Afghan people.

We, the U.S. and the West, are faced with a most curious irony in the various councils of the United Nations—our creation, after all, and one in which we invested the highest hopes and idealism and genuineness of purpose back in 1945. I think it is ironic indeed that this forum, which was to represent the collective conscience of peace-loving people throughout the world, has become an arena in which the Soviet Union is uniquely capable of projecting its strengths and influence, and one in which by contrast the vulnerabilities of the U.S. and the democratic West are peculiarly exposed.

Consider various characteristics of UN proceedings from this perspective of Soviet advantage and Western disadvantage. Hardly anyone, it seems to me, takes the UN Charter quite seriously any more. After all, the Charter requires the member nations to abjure the use of force to resolve conflicts; yet, in the years since 1945, the world has been witness to some one hundred twenty-five death-dealing conflicts, and we are still counting. The Charter also forbids aggression, it
insists on respect for the sovereign autonomy of all nations, it calls for the protection and enhancement of human rights, for the enjoyment of human freedom, and for the spread of human welfare and of a better material way of life for all people, everywhere in the world. Worthy objectives, every one of them: I raise no question about that. The question I do raise, however, is this: to what demonstrable extent has the United Nations, as an organization, as a collective of its members, contributed in the last forty years to the fulfillment of any or all of these great goals? The record, it seems to me, is not favorable.

To repeat, I do not believe that most UN members, most of the time, take the Charter all that seriously any more. It is true of the United States as well—in the sense of any real expectation that the principles of the Charter will govern the behavior of most of the members or control the outcomes of the UN process. All the less so, indeed, when we consider the particular issues and debates that dominate the UN agenda. How can anyone take quite seriously the Charter's prohibition of armed aggression when, in the face of a clear and unprovoked Libyan invasion of its neighbor Chad, in the summer of 1983, the Security Council is unable even to table a resolution of moderate disapproval—and spends half its time debating the parallel Libyan charge that the U.S., joined by France and Zaire, are the guilty ones, owing to their response to Chad's call for help?

What is even more peculiar, however, is that the Soviets and their clients and surrogates (like Libya, for example) are not even expected to live up to the principles enunciated in the Charter. I cannot count the times I was chided by my colleagues with such questions as, "Why do you Americans keep arguing with the Soviets? Why do you keep making these harsh statements about Soviet behavior?" Or: "Surely you must know that none of us believes, really, that the Soviet Union ever will live up to the purposes of the Charter. We know what they're like: they're gangsters, an outlaw regime—so why should we expect them to behave any differently than in fact they do?"

This, of course, is the notorious UN "double standard" in its purest form. There is a direct corollary to this first point, and that is, where we and our allies do make a stab at conducting serious, fact-based debate within the UN, by and large the Soviets deal only with abstract models of Communist theory—casting themselves as the vanguard among progressive forces riding the inexorable wave of history. They
do not speak of reality. They speak of a model that never has been, is not now, and in my view never will be. But this creates a rigged arena, a debate that is unequal and unbalanced by definition. We are expected to and do in fact address the imperfections and the short-falls in our democratic societies. The Soviets on the other hand deal with the mythology of Communist ideology—and that is all that is expected of them.

A second corollary: We tend to engage in good faith negotiation in the Security Council. We tend to seek solutions. We try at least to shape Security Council actions that not only address genuine issues of conflict, real and potential, but also may make some contribution to their resolution. We really do go the last mile. The Soviets, for their part, tend not to negotiate at all. They generally state a bottom-line position, stick with it, insist on it, and hope, expect, and anticipate that the U.S. and the West will continue to seek to reconcile the differences. I would simply point out that once you embark on the process of splitting the difference, which starts typically from the Soviet bottom line, not ours, there is an unending progression of additional differences that also may be split, and the advantage thus falls mostly on the Soviet side and not that of the U.S. and the West. At the U.S. Mission we called this process "preemptive capitulation" and we began to turn the situation around—by, among other things, making our bottom line clear from the outset and sticking with it, and by accepting the obvious fact that, sometimes, no agreement is better than a bad one. But the process itself, if one assumes good faith at its core, tends always to play itself out to the disadvantage of those who bring the good faith to bear. And that, typically, is not the Soviets.

I turn to a fourth point. In UN councils, the U.S. tends to argue its case, on its merits, as best it can. And time and again, because of the fundamental nature of our free and open society—because one of its great glories is its tolerance and indeed encouragement of dissent—the Soviet representatives and their clients within the Bloc are able to draw their arguments largely from U.S. and Western sources: from the major media, print and electronic, from the scholarly community, from the Congressional Record. In my own experience, they often misconstrued, misrepresented, or plain misstated their source material. Thus, they came close to using U.S. and Western spokesmen to make the Soviet case against the U.S. case. Typically, it was not so much "us" against "them" as "us" against "us"—and this even extended to
such relatively clear-cut issues as the destruction of KAL 007, where the Soviets drew heavily as the debate proceeded on mythical "spy" scenarios that began appearing (possibly in part as a consequence of deliberate Soviet disinformation campaigns) in the Western media. As I've said, tolerance of dissent—and the protection of even quite outrageous opinion—are great strengths of liberal democratic societies like the U.S. But in the UN context it can lead to a rigged and unequal arena of debate.

There is yet another most curious irony—this is my fifth major point—about Soviet advantages and U.S. vulnerability in the UN setting. The Soviets, to their credit, play UN politics with considerable skill. And these are a style of politics, by and large, that we Americans invented: these are the politics, as Ambassador Kirkpatrick often observed, were associated with multi-party legislatures anywhere in the U.S. or the democratic West. It's a process that involves vote trading, log-rolling, the buying and selling of influence. The Soviets engage in this process skillfully and constantly, and they enjoy a couple of significant tactical advantages as they go about their legislative manipulations.

In the first place, they rely heavily on the extremes in the various regional and ideological groupings or blocs that wield most of the power within the UN. (As you might expect, the process I'm describing holds in particular for the General Assembly—in effect, the annual "legislature" of the UN. But, increasingly, through the election procedure and through policy-setting caucuses, bloc dominance also pertains within the Security Council where it takes only seven votes among the 15 members to control the Council agenda: any affirmative action by the Council requires nine votes.) And, typical of legislatures or indeed of democratic societies anywhere, the extremes tend to drive and control the process; centrists (or moderates) tend to be less concerned, less focused, less persistent in maintaining their position: they go home earlier and doubtless sleep better than the extremists, but they don't win as many battles.

The Soviets play the extremes skillfully, and particularly so within what is called the Non-Aligned Movement, the NAM—a loose grouping of about 95 Third World countries that largely controls the UN process. Cuba used to hold the chairmanship of the NAM (which tells you something about the UN definition of non-alignment). But Cuba or no Cuba (India currently holds the NAM chairmanship), the Soviets have master-client relationships with one or more countries
in all of the regional blocs within the NAM and in the UN generally. The only exception is Western Europe, and even here the Soviet-Greek tie is becoming disturbingly cozy. In our own hemisphere, for example, there are Cuba and Nicaragua (and formerly Grenada); in Asia, they have ties with Vietnam and the Laotian People's Republic (and even with miniscule Vanuatu); in the Middle East, with Syria, Libya, and Democratic Yemen; Eastern Europe is the Bloc proper; and in Africa, there is a variety of Marxist and near-Marxist regimes with special Soviet relationships—Benin and Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and others. So the Soviets are able to manipulate the blocs from within, as we are not. Almost alone among the UN's one hundred fifty-nine member countries, the U.S. is indeed non-aligned; the U.S. belongs to no regional bloc, not even to groupings of the like-minded (except for the loosest of associations with the European Community, the EC-10).

The skill with which the Soviets "play" UN politics is, in my judgment, made all the more successful because their motivation in the UN setting permit them an almost limitless degree of flexibility, almost a free ride in the seizing of tactical advantage. As I've observed already, the U.S. by and large is serious about the UN. We engage in genuine debate about genuine issues. We seek genuinely to defuse situations of potential conflict. Soviet purposes, in contrast, by and large are disruptive. They engage in making mischief, in deliberate destabilization. Their purpose is to cause trouble, not to head it off—to create opportunities, in other words, for the extension of Soviet influence. It is relatively easy for them to seize on almost any issue that comes along and play it to their advantage.

The classical case of this in recent years and months, of course, and in my own experience at the UN, is that of Soviet involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict and, specifically, the Soviet role in the Security Council throughout the 1982 war in Lebanon. There is no question, in my judgment, but that Soviet manipulation of the Council extended the conflict by measurable weeks or even months, helped to preserve the PLO as a military force in the region, shielded the Syrian occupation of northern and eastern Lebanon from any Council-mandated countermeasures—and, as an overall result, rendered the reconstitution of an independent, autonomous Lebanon difficult if not impossible. We are now witnessing some of the fruits of this Soviet labor: the rebuilding of Syrian strength (and then some), the virtual balkanization of
Lebanon into warring factions, and the reinfiltration of PLO armed elements into southern Lebanon. (The most recent estimate that I've seen in the press is upwards of two thousand armed terrorists now on the ground south of the Awali.) I am not suggesting that the Soviets, alone, brought all this to pass—simply that they contributed mightily, and that their skillful manipulation of UN politics and the decision-making process helped them succeed.

I'll let the balance sheet of Soviet advantages and U.S. vulnerabilities in the UN context stand there—and turn, finally, to the obvious question, "So what?" Does it in fact make very much difference how the UN game is played, who plays it, who wins and who loses? For that matter, does the UN itself make much difference any more, one way or the other? We could brush all this aside as essentially irrelevant, and get on with the serious business of U.S. foreign policy: namely, conflict resolution; projecting the goals and purposes of the United States internationally; protecting the security of the U.S., and working with our friends and allies to protect theirs.

I want to give several answers to the question of "so what". For one thing, we can indeed play the game in the UN better than we've tended to play it in recent years—and one great success that I would claim for Ambassador Kirkpatrick is that, in the four years she led the U.S. delegation there, the U.S. became enormously more skillful both in understanding the nature of the game and in playing it. In fact, the U.S. now wins some. U.S. influence has rarely been greater. We do not by any means control the agenda, but it has become marginally more rational, more productive of useful outcomes, less dangerous to the vital interests of the U.S. and the democratic West. This is one possible answer to the question, "so what", and a not unimportant one. We can use the UN for our own purposes; increasingly, we are doing so.

Beyond this answer, however, there is another possibility, one that gets us a lot closer to the heart of the successes and failures of U.S. foreign policy generally. I return to an earlier point: that what makes the UN arena rigged against us and debate at the UN inherently unfair to the U.S. and the West is the tendency—which we let happen and even encourage with our guilt complex—for this debate to compare and contrast the mythology of the Soviet model with the hard, difficult, ambiguous realities of foreign policy making in this world, a world of adversarial interests and the threat of con-
flict. This is not just or even mainly a UN problem of course: it is a problem inherent in the rivalry of free societies and nations with unfree, totalitarian, imperial regimes.

In this real world, moreover, the U.S. associates itself with countries and regimes that are not perfectly free or democratic, with counties and regimes that, in the best of all possible worlds, we might not want to associates ourselves with at all. But we do so in part out of strategic necessity—and, beyond strategic necessity, out of the very real hope that the evolution of these countries and regimes is in the direction of greater freedom and more nearly effective democratic institutions. This is a complex brief to argue and to uphold. But, surely, it is a prime mover of our foreign policy.

A reasonable case can be made for strengthening the U.S. role in the UN if only to carry this fight to the Soviets, and to invite the non-aligned to listen and to reflect—to keep on arguing that, among the superpowers, the Soviets up to now have had an easier time of it than the U.S., but no more. As things stand, the Soviets commit open aggression, but they are not held responsible for it. They engage in brutal intimidation, but that is taken in stride. Their blatant use of force to project their influence and to protect their turf is attributed to a long (and falsified) history of victimization, thereby justifying it. All this must be challenged. On the affirmative side, the case also can be made in the UN forum that we, the U.S. and the democratic West, intend to stick to our principles—we intend to continue to try at least to persuade the genuinely uncommitted (of which there are many within the non-aligned bloc) that the course we project for our friends and allies is one that, in the long run, will come closer, if not as close as we might like, to fulfilling the objectives of the UN Charter, based as they are on the values and the deeply held beliefs of the American people and the people of the democratic West. That might just constitute an effective brief within the UN.