



Insight

Autumn in New York

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It's been a busy couple of weeks at the United Nations, even without the usual drama of appearances by Hugo Chavez or Moammar Qadhafi. In case you've lost track with all the hubbub, here are some of the main storylines that emerged from New York this month.

Palestinian Statehood Fantasy: As expected, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas presented to Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon an application for full Palestinian membership at the UN. The application was sent to the UN Security Council, where it faces a certain veto by the U.S. Reports indicate the Palestinians would then appeal to the UN General Assembly, where the U.S. cannot veto it, and the measure would pass by a wide margin.

However, no General Assembly declaration can make Palestine a state. It won't change the Israelis' relationship with the Palestinians, and it won't change life for the average Palestinian. The move could have some indirect effects, however. It could serve as another talking point for those who seek to discredit Israel, and perhaps result in more international isolation for the Jewish state. It also could raise expectations among Palestinians and lead to violence when those hopes are unmet.

Trying to forestall these consequences, the Middle East Quartet (comprised of the U.S., European Union, Russia, and the UN Secretary-General) made a proposal that actually could restart the peace process. The Israelis welcomed it, while the Palestinians spurned it.

This episode provides a good illustration of the "fantasyland" thinking that dominates the

UN. The General Assembly remains eager as ever to champion causes that have little to do with reality and run counter to U.S. interests. Supporters of those causes frequently are willing to settle for symbolic victories at the UN rather than taking the steps necessary to actually accomplish something in the real world. Moreover, by sucking all the oxygen out of the room, this latest chapter in the Israeli-Palestinian saga left delegates with little time or energy to make headway on other pressing issues, such as the upheaval elsewhere in the Middle East.

Racism Farce: The third Durban Conference Against Racism also took place in New York this month. Since the first meeting ten years ago, Durban conferences have been synonymous with anti-Semitism and the singling out of Israel for criticism. In 2001, the U.S. and Israel walked out as conferees sought to reinstate the UN's "Zionism equals racism" mantra while denying or minimizing the Holocaust. Meanwhile, observers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) distributed odious anti-Semitic literature and waved banners reading "Hitler should have finished the job."

This year, 14 countries boycotted, including the U.S., Israel, Canada, and several major European democracies. As expected, the tyrannical presidents of Iran and Zimbabwe pontificated about racism and human rights, conveniently ignoring their own bigotry and outrages in their own countries. Few NGOs participated - some truth-tellers actually had been prohibited from attending, while many others stayed away because they were loathe to give the event more credibility than it deserved. Nonetheless, the General Assembly adopted a resolution affirming the value of the Durban process. An anti-Durban conference was organized nearby to highlight the UN's failings on human rights, and drew a distinguished list of presenters. U.S. media coverage of Durban III has been scant, perhaps to avoid either embarrassing the UN or drawing attention to a widely discredited endeavor.

Durban is just one the fora used by the UN to address the topic of human rights. The [UN Human Rights Council](#) is currently in the process of wrapping up its 18th regular meeting.

This episode illustrates the UN's uncanny ability to take what sounds like a good idea - a conference against racism - and turn it into something loathsome. It is also another example of the UN's continuing fixation with demonizing Israel above all other countries under the guise of "human rights." While the Durban conferences may be the most flagrantly flawed of the UN's various human rights outlets, it nevertheless puts on display the ugly mindsets that have perverted much of their work.

Health Care Manifesto: This month also included a major UN summit on non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. Previously, the UN had held only one other high-level meeting on a health-related topic, HIV/AIDS.

The summit declaration wisely stressed the importance of prevention and lifestyle choices like diet, tobacco use, exercise, and so on. It also made the case that NCDs disproportionately kill people in developing countries, and cited “the vicious cycle whereby non-communicable diseases and their risk factors worsen poverty, while poverty contributes to rising rates of non-communicable diseases.” It went on to call for wealthy countries to increase their aid to developing countries.

This episode illustrates the inclination of the UN and its supporters to internationalize every problem, and to use every opportunity to compel wealthy nations to transfer resources to the developing world. Make no mistake – American humanitarian assistance is an important reflection of our values, and we should not be stingy. For example, our role in combating AIDS in Africa was the right choice morally and strategically, especially considering the disease’s destabilizing effect on the productive workers and parents of an entire continent. Moreover, the strategy for addressing AIDS was relatively straightforward: antiretroviral drugs, education, and condoms. Managing the threat of such killers as heart disease, diabetes and cancer is clearly more than a matter of money, however, as evidenced by the prevalence of NCDs here in the U.S.

Street Cred for South Sudan and the new Libya: On the bright side, the UN recognized a new state in South Sudan and a new government in Libya. The UN had played an important role in paving the way for the independence of South Sudan, through a peacekeeping force, diplomatic support for the independence referendum, and a continuing UN mission to help the new government build capacity. In July, following a UN Security Council vote to recommend it, the General Assembly voted unanimously to extend UN membership to the world’s newest country. This month marked the South Sudanese President’s first address before the General Assembly, which he delivered wearing his trademark giant cowboy hat.

Also this month, the General Assembly voted to accept the credentials of the transitional government to take Libya's UN seat. The Security Council then voted, not without controversy, to ease some sanctions and establish a support mission to help the new government get on its feet. Later, a high-level meeting on Libya was held, in which participants pledged their support and celebrated the UN's role in addressing the crisis. President Obama called the UN's handling of the situation an example of "how the international community should work in the 21st century."

The South Sudan independence episode is a feel-good story for the UN and offers an interesting contrast with the Palestinian saga. After working through a lengthy peace process, supported by the U.S., the UN, and others, South Sudan won independence and received unanimous support for UN membership at the Security Council and General Assembly. [Challenges remain for the country](#), but having worked through the right channels, its legitimacy is beyond a doubt.

The Libya episode also showcases the role of the UN in conferring legitimacy, this time by recognizing a new government in one of its member states. While the transitional government still faces opposition from some African states and populist Latin American ones, it now bears the UN seal of approval. At the same time, we must bear in mind that the UN's role in addressing the crises in Libya and elsewhere has been [uneven](#), and additional action is still necessary to unfreeze remaining assets, lift outstanding sanctions, and lift the arms embargo. Nevertheless, President Obama's summit remarks underscore his enduring confidence in "leading from behind." [Hopefully, Libya will work out for the best](#), but it's far from clear whether the example can be replicated elsewhere. Just ask the people of Syria.