

On Wednesday in New York, most of the world's leaders will gather at the United Nations World Summit for what was supposed to be a strong endorsement of a visionary plan for global governance in the 21st century. But the ideological clash between the US and much of the developing world has brought the meeting to the brink of failure.

Weary diplomats have been scrambling to come up with face-saving compromises, still being fought over as this is written. But it is already clear that while the summit will make some progress on the development and security goals set last March by Kofi Annan, UN secretary-general, the final document will fail to chart the bold course he urged.

This summit has been years in the making. In the aftermath of the international community's grave failures in the Balkans and Rwanda in the 1990s, Mr Annan set up several commissions to address the issue of protecting civilians when governments fail to do so, and to look at ways to meet the developing world's urgent needs.

After the Iraq war in 2003, he recognised the gap in perceptions of threat between the developing and the developed worlds. For the US, that threat was primarily terrorism and weapons of mass destruction; for the developing world, it was the threat of underdevelopment, poverty, debt, HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases.

Mr Annan offered sensible proposals in his March report, calling for the developed world to commit 0.7 per cent of gross national product to development, ease trade barriers and slash debt in exchange for a commitment by the developing world to implement good governance and get serious about ending support for terrorists and weapons proliferation. Such steps were part of the effort to reach the UN's Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

All summer, diplomats whittled away at draft after draft, making scant progress. Throughout the process, much of the developing world has seemed stuck in the 1960s, arguing for the legitimacy of terrorism in liberation struggles, undermining the urgent need for UN management reform and pathetically unable to agree on how to expand the Security Council. The strongest opposition to the text has been led by a collection of retrograde states including Pakistan and Algeria, and increasingly, Russia and China which have opposed any perceived intrusion on state sovereignty.

The US is also blocking progress. It is fighting against its own ideological hot buttons, such as the Kyoto protocol on climate change, the International Criminal Court, specific levels of development aid, disarmament and non-proliferation, and abortion rights. Washington only began to engage seriously in mid-August when John Bolton, as the new US permanent representative to the UN, sought initially to restart the process from scratch.

The result of so many pressures from so many sides was a convoluted draft with pages of disputed texts in brackets that diplomats were still arguing over as their leaders arrived in New York.

The end result will be mixed. The US has now agreed that the specific targets for development assistance can be mentioned, but not specifically endorsed. The discredited Commission on

Human Rights, hijacked over the past decade by Syria, Cuba, Libya, Sudan and others in the club of the repressive, will be replaced by a new Human Rights Council but of still uncertain composition. Argument remains about how much more authority and flexibility to give the UN secretary-general to manage the institution, despite the urgent call for this in the recent Volcker reports recommendations on UN reform.

On the brighter side, diplomats have, after much wrangling, agreed to recognise the worlds responsibility to protect civilians and improve peacekeeping operations. A new Peacebuilding Commission will focus on the needs of nations in, and emerging from, conflict. While important, these achievements are far from sufficient for preparing the UN, and the world, for the 21st century. They fail to address the toughest peace and security issues: terrorism, use of force, non-proliferation and Security Council reform. Even after September 11 2001, a hard-core group continues to block any definition of terrorism, agreeing only to address the issue later in the year.

Facing opposition from the US, coupled with scepticism from the developing world, the proposals regarding disarmament and non-proliferation, and criteria for the use of force, are essentially dead. So, too, is any change in the makeup of the Security Council. Four Security Council aspirants Japan, India, Brazil and Germany failed in their efforts to create six new permanent seats including two African ones. Africa rejected the proposal.

World leaders will put on their game faces for the summit but the depressing truth is they have failed to take up the secretary-generals challenge. His proposals offer the right way forward for the 21st century but they will have to wait for the world to catch up with his vision. Until then, the world will remain the worse for it.

The writer, vice president for multilateral affairs of the International Crisis Group, is author of *The Superpower Myth: The Use and Misuse of American Might* (John Wiley