

Keep United Nations reform on track
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What is at stake? Quite a lot. First is the question of whether the Millennium Development Goals - established with a flourish in 2000 and designed to make decisive progress by 2015 in dealing with poverty, malnutrition, disease and environmental degradation - can be rescued from increasing irrelevance and reinvigorated by new policy and resource commitments.

Second is whether the UN can get better at preventing conflict and state failure; and take on a responsibility to protect citizens if their own governments are unwilling or unable to perform that task.

A further issue is whether the threats to international peace and security from terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction can be countered by concerted action by the UN and individual states.

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Not one of the issues identified will, however, simply go away; they will return, like Banquo's ghost, to haunt future gatherings. What will matter is whether a critical mass of decisions can be taken this week that will enable the organisation to move ahead in a more effective and equitable manner.

And of even greater importance will be whether decisions taken in New York are properly implemented, and whether hard choices are made when the new instruments and reformed institutions are put to the test, as they will inevitably be in the near future.

The shine would rapidly be taken off the outcome of the summit by a failure to deal with cases such as Darfur, to conclude the Doha development round of trade talks in 2006, to get the post-Kyoto discussions on 'global warming' on to a sound footing involving the US and the main developing countries, to get progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, in Africa in particular, and to deal with the threats to counter-proliferation policy posed by the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programmes.

When Tony Blair, the prime minister, travels to New York he will not only go as the representative of a permanent member of the UN Security Council but he will speak on behalf of the European Union, whose members provide between 40 and 50 per cent of the resources on which every UN action depends. Both Britain and the EU have much at stake.

The EU's policy of effective multilateralism needs a strong UN if it is to be made to work and that is in Britain's interest too. We cannot afford to allow US ambivalence to derail UN reform, which the recent report on the oil-for-food saga shows is needed now more than ever.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick was British permanent representative to the UN from 1990 to 1995 and a member of the UN secretary-general's High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change in 2003-04

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