Missed Opportunities and Misplaced Priorities at the UN General Assembly

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In the aftermath of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly, we are painfully reminded of just how far the UN has strayed from its once noble mission and how desperately that institution is in need of drastic reform. The UN has now become the tool of choice for enemies of freedom, peace and stability: from Abu Mazen continuing to undermine the peace process by seeking unilateral statehood to Russia doing everything in its power to protect the Assad regime in Syria, it is clear that the UN is being manipulated by obstructionists and cronyism, undermining any real effort at resolving many of the world’s most pressing issues.

Millions of Syrians are in desperate need of some form of assistance, ISIL is threatening to eradicate ancient ethnic and religious minority communities in the Middle East, and instead of bringing the nations of the world together to address and resolve these crises, the UN is in a state of paralysis and fecklessness. The UN has become an institution that other nations use to undermine our national security interests and block our foreign policy, yet at the same time it benefits from our generosity.

United States Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power recently noted that there are many obstacles at the UN that hamper U.S. interests, such as the efforts to delegitimize Israel. While I appreciate the fact that the administration has recognized that reforms need to be implemented at the UN, it has been seven years and what has the administration done, where are the results? Instead, it is clear that the Obama administration has no intention of leveraging our assistance to achieve the reforms needed to secure changes within that institution. As Ambassador Power testified in June, the administration’s policy is to continue to push for reforms from within – to pay first, reform later. This approach has clearly failed. The only true way to advance U.S. interests and promote American values at the UN is to insist on a reform first, pay later approach.

That is why I have once again reintroduced the United Nations Transparency, Accountability, and Reform Act, H.R. 3667. My bill simply seeks to put Americans in charge of how their billions in taxpayer funds are spent each year at the UN by moving from mandatory to voluntary contributions. Each year, the U.S. assessment of the UN budget is 22 percent, and 27 percent of all Peacekeeping Operations. That is by far the largest single assessed contribution for both, and it amounts to billions of dollars. And what is the return on investment? Two-thirds of the UN member countries pay a combined total of around 1 percent of the entire UN budget, yet these countries can outvote and outmaneuver any U.S. initiative they oppose. Tyrants in Iran, Cuba, North Korea and elsewhere use the UN to stymie American-led proposals and to disseminate anti-U.S. and anti-Israel propaganda; and we’re paying for them to do it. The dysfunctionality and hypocrisy at the UN are rampant: some of the world’s worst human rights violators sit on the Human Rights Council; countries that summarily stone women have been selected to the Commission on the Status of Women; and, nations under UN Security Council sanctions for violating their nonproliferation obligations were selected to chair a conference on disarmament.

The UN is nothing short of a giant bureaucracy that has gotten out of control and that needs to be reined in. If we shift our billions each year away from the agencies within the UN most in need of change, they will be faced with the prospects of having to scuttle their operations or implement reforms to make them more transparent and accountable to their member states. Either way, the American taxpayers are better served with a more efficient and effective use of their money. Nearly every successful U.S. effort to reform the UN since the 1980s has come about by conditioning our contributions upon reform, including the Helms-Biden agreements of the late 1990s, which conditioned U.S. arrears payments to the UN directly upon institutional reforms.

Last week, during his speech to the UN General Assembly, President Obama missed a golden opportunity to address the need for reform at that institution in order to return it back to the principles it was founded upon. Instead, the president took partisan swipes at Congress and used the pulpit to abdicate American leadership on the world stage regarding the most pressing security issues to a body that has proven time and again its feebleness and indifference. Last week was an opportunity for the president to lead the global community; to press for reforms at the United Nations so that it could one day be a body that helps maintain peace and stability throughout the world and promote the respect for human rights and the rule of law. But the president opted to take the path of least resistance. That is why Congress needs to take the lead in the effort to fix this broken system, for the interests of the U.S. taxpayer and our national security.