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EXCLUSIVE: After a Year of Setbacks, U.N. Looks to Take Charge of World's Agenda

By George Russell

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After a year of humiliating setbacks, United Nations Secretary General Ban ki-Moon and about 60 of his top lieutenants — the top brass of the entire U.N. system — spent their Labor Day weekend at a remote Austrian Alpine retreat, discussing ways to put their sprawling organization in charge of the world's agenda.

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Details concerning the two-day, closed-door sessions in the comfortable village of Alpbach were closely guarded. Nonetheless, position papers for the meeting obtained by Fox News indicate that the topics included:

- how to restore "climate change" as a top global priority after the fiasco of last year's Copenhagen summit;
- how to continue to try to make global redistribution of wealth the real basis of that climate agenda, and widen the discussion further to encompass the idea of "global public goods";
- how to keep growing U.N. peacekeeping efforts into missions involved in the police, courts, legal systems and other aspects of strife-torn countries;
- how to capitalize on the global tide of migrants from poor nations to rich ones, to encompass a new "international migration governance framework";
- how to make "clever" use of new technologies to deepen direct ties with what the U.N. calls "civil society," meaning novel ways to bypass its member nation states and deal directly with constituencies that support U.N. agendas.

As one underlying theme of the sessions, the top U.N. bosses seemed to be grappling often with how to cope with the pesky issue of national sovereignty, which — according to the position papers, anyway — continued to thwart many of their most ambitious schemes, especially when it comes to many different kinds of "global governance."

Not coincidentally, the conclave of bureaucrats also saw in "global governance" a greater role for themselves.

As a position paper intended for their first group session put it, in the customary glutinous prose of the organization's internal documents: "the U.N. should be able to take the lead in setting the global agenda, engage effectively with other multinational and regional organizations as well as civil society and non-state stakeholders, and transform itself into a tool to help implement the globally agreed objectives."

And for that to happen, the paper continues, "it will be necessary to deeply reflect on the substance of sovereignty, and accept that changes in our perceptions are a good indication of the direction we are going."

Hammering away at perceptions that nation-states cannot adequately meet global challenges, but the U.N. can, is a major theme of the position papers, which were assembled by a variety of U.N. think tanks, task forces and institutions, including the United Nations Development Program, and the U.N.'s Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

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National sovereignty — meaning the refusal of major powers like India, China and the United States to go along with sweeping global agendas — was specifically indicted for the failure of the much ballyhooed Copenhagen summit on climate change. "National sovereignty remains supreme," as one position paper noted.

Nonetheless, the U.N. leaders intend to keep trying to change that, especially when it comes to the climate agenda. "The next 40 years will prove pivotal," one paper argues, while laying out the basis of a renewed U.N. climate campaign, the "50-50-50 Challenge."

That refers to a projection that by 2050, the world's population will reach an estimated 9 billion (50 percent higher than today), at the same time that the U.N.-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — producer of the scandal-tainted 2007 Global Assessment of global warming — is calling for a 50 percent reduction in world green house gas emissions.

According to the paper prepared by Secretary General Ban's own climate change team, however, the newly rebranded challenge still depends on the same economic remedy proposed for Copenhagen: a drastic redistribution of global wealth, "nothing less than a fundamental transformation of the global economy."

Rolling just about every U.N. mantra into one, the paper declares that "nothing is more crucial to preventing run-away climate change than lifting billions out of poverty, protecting our planet and fostering long-term peace and prosperity for all."

And to do that, the paper suggests, equally dramatic shifts in political power may be needed. "Is the global governance structure, still dominated by national sovereignty, capable of responding with the coherence and speed needed?" it asks. "Or do we need to push the 'reset' button and rethink global governance to meet the 50-50-50 Challenge?"

Yet even as the U.N. bosses talk of delivering billions from poverty, their main aim, the papers argue should be much, much larger: to limit and redirect the aspirations for a better life of rising middle classes around the world.

As the opening session paper puts it: "The real challenge comes from the exponential growth of the global consumerist society driven by ever higher aspirations of the upper and middle layers in rich countries as well as the expanding demand of emerging middle-class in developing countries. Our true ambition should be therefore creating incentives for the profound transformation of attitudes and consumption styles."

The answer to that "real challenge," as well as many others addressed in the position papers, is that the U.N. and its proliferating array of funds, programs, institutes, and initiatives, should push themselves forward as the great synthesizer of solutions to global problems: "connecting the dots," as the climate change paper puts it, across a "range of issues," including "climate, water, food, energy, and health."

"At the practical level, through the U.N. system we have all kinds of expertise and capacities, even if not adequate resources, to actually do something," the paper notes.

How to get more of those resources is another major theme of many of the papers. As one of the documents focusing on food security notes, "development assistance funding is less readily available and the donors are ever more focused on demonstrable results." One suggestion: tap global philanthropies, as well as link together "a broad range of public sector, business and civil society partners."

The U.N. bosses also need to make sure that the institution sits at top tables where the world's financial decisions are made. It is "urgent to secure U.N. participation" at regular meetings of the G-20 finance ministers and their deputies," according to one of the papers, a group that the U.N. Secretariat, based in New York City and Geneva, does not interact with very much.

That observation ties into another Albach theme: pushing global financial regulation even further.

"The much paraded reform of financial governance institutions has not gone far enough," the position paper for the U.N. leadership's keynote session asserts, and the voting power of emerging players and developing world, in general, which demand a greater say on these matters, remains inadequate."

The answer? "An enhanced political will is clearly needed to avoid return to status quo, to push forward regulatory mechanisms, and improve financial governance."

Along with planting a new flag in the field of international financial regulation, the U.N. chiefs also contemplated the further growth of the U.N. as the world's policeman. As another paper notes, U.N. peacekeeping operations "will soon have almost 17,000 United Nations police officers serving on four continents" — little more than two years after establishing what one papers calls the institutions "Standing Police Capacity."

The peacekeepers are now also building a "standing justice and corrections element" to go with the semi-permanent police force — a permanent strike force to establish courts and prisons in nations where peacekeepers are stationed.

In essence, as another paper observes, the U.N. peacekeeping effort is transforming into a new kind of supervisory organism in which not only conflicts but also national institutions and cultures must be regulated for longer and longer periods of time.

"Even where a semblance of stability is achieved," the paper by Ban's peace-building support office argues, the achievement of peace may involve more than "adopting a constitution or holding elections." It adds that "more fundamental change may be needed in a country's institutions and political culture as well as in public perceptions and attitudes."

(At the same time, as another paper makes clear, "some" U.N. peacekeepers come from countries "where the armed forces and police are seriously implicated in human rights violations," including sexual crimes. While such actions "cannot be tolerated," the paper makes clear the U.N. has no clear answers on how to police its own behavior.)

The answer to many if not most of the problems outlined in the U.N. papers is, as the opening session paper puts it: "multilateralism is instrumental to the success of our response to global challenges."

But not any old multilateralism. The other major theme of the position papers is that the world organization, a haphazard array of at least 37 major funds, programs, and institutions, and a proliferating number of regulatory and other authorities, should be knitting itself into a much more close-knit global system, with greater control over its own finances, along with a stronger role in setting the international agenda.

How successful Ban and his chieftains will be at pushing that agenda may soon be seen, as the secretary general hosts the lead-off event of the fall diplomatic season, a two-day summit starting September 20 on the so-called Millennium Development Goals.

That refers to the U.N.-sponsored compact among nations to halve the number of the world's poorest people, achieve global primary schooling, reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and enhance the standing of women, among other goals, by 2015.

The position papers from Ban's conclave make clear that Ban and his team are deeply concerned that momentum toward the MDGs, as they are known, is faltering, although one paper notes that "with the right policies, adequate investment and reliable international support, the MDGs remain achievable."

In that sense, the secretive session in Alpach was not only a planning session, but also the equivalent of a half-time locker room huddle.

What is at stake, the papers make clear, is not only the alleged betterment of the world, but the U.N.'s soaring ambitions for itself — no matter what roadblocks national sovereignty may throw in its way.

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