



The Efficacy of International Institutions

By
Mark Stout

Note: [this article](#) originally appeared in the 10 June 2010 edition of Air University's [The Wright Stuff](#).

Keep doing what you're doing, keep getting what you got

At the recent West Point graduation, President Obama took the opportunity to say something many already knew: he wants diplomacy and 'international institutions' to play a more prominent role in the world. Just what are the challenges the President wants addressed? It's a long and humbling list including countering nuclear proliferation and terrorism; countering violent extremism and insurgencies; securing nuclear materials; combating changing climate; sustaining global growth; helping countries feed themselves and care for their sick; and preventing conflict and healing wounds.

'International institutions' in the context of the President's speech are largely existing *multi-and inter governmental* arrangements and to a lesser extent, *non-governmental organizations*. A distinction is needed because without it, multi-national businesses, nationalized for-profits, and the like could all be considered as 'international institutions' even as it's clear they aren't the general focus of the President's comments. This means the *International House of Pancakes*, while a noble institution in its own right, will not be considered as pertinent to the conversation.

Because there are already many international institutions to address the President's list of challenges, the first question should be "Why haven't these problems already been solved?" The answer contains at least three pillars.

First, international institutions will be composed of members with diverse, transitory, and sometimes mutually exclusive interests. Shared goals, or a lack of the same, are why we have politics, and as Clausewitz would point out, it's also why we have wars. One recent event among the *many* that could have been chosen to highlight the extent to which this is true is the recent 'nuclear agreement' that Brazil and Turkey brokered with Iran.

The agreement proposes to take Iranian low-enriched uranium and to enrich it on Iran's behalf to levels appropriate for only medical or electrical power production uses. When the idea was first offered by the U.S. and others in the fall of 2009, the goal was to control about 80 percent of Iran's LEU which would slow--but not stop--the Iranian nuclear weapons program. However, Iran never quite accepted the initial deal, nor was the offer withdrawn.

Since the '80 percent' offer was made, Iran has significantly increased their LEU inventory and they now have enough to simultaneously ship about 2600 pounds of the LEU out-of-country while still having an adequate LEU supply (about 2200 pounds) for continuing weapons-grade enrichment. The Brazilian-Turkish-Iranian agreement also means Iran is less likely to suffer a fourth-round of U.N sanctions, even as the effectiveness of rounds one, two, and three appear to be limited.

As such, the entire point of the '80 percent' deal has been overcome by events but even worse, the Brazilian and Turkish involvement now provides a fig-leaf of legitimacy for Iran. Were Brazil and Turkey approaching the issue as a global or regional security issue? No--this happened in large part because both nations wanted to increase their international stature (although Turkey may also have been concerned with appeasing a thuggish and soon-to-be nuclear neighbor). As for Iran, they may get what they exactly what they want: to continue to build towards a nuclear weapon capability and to avoid additional sanctions. So while the whole Brazil-Turkey-Iran endeavor could be considered 'diplomacy' (albeit from an ad hoc and non-aligned group of 'international actors') it certainly isn't an outcome that furthers U.S. interests.

Second, neither diplomacy nor international institutions are matched with enough funding to do the things the President wants, so if international institutions are to do more, it's clear they will require more resources. The issue of 'whose pays and how much?' never goes away and even NATO, perhaps the most successful international institution of all time, is not exempt. In 2008, NATO said the U.S. contributed 4 percent of gross domestic product towards defense while the average for European allies was 1.7 percent. While the combined gross domestic product of the NATO states is roughly equal to that of the U.S., the U.S. contributes 66 percent of NATO's funding. Yes, it only makes sense to want allies to contribute more, what happens when they don't?

Part of America's task, the President said, is to "build new partnerships, and shape stronger international standards and institutions" by steering "currents of cooperation" in "the direction of liberty and justice." However, since both time and money are limited resources and since the United States is already thought to be doing too much, what will the U.S. *stop doing* (or do less of) to allow for more diplomacy and 'international institution' building? The bill-payer has already been tagged and this will entail shrinkage in U.S. defense budgets. Still, if like the U.S., the rest of the world also has their time and money fully committed--and ignoring the fact they may not be paying their fair share to begin with--what will the world stop doing (or do less of) in order to help build new partnerships or stronger institutions?

Third and finally, even if we can trade bailout bucks or defense dollars to build and shape international institutions like NATO or the U.N., it matters little if the problems themselves are too difficult to be 'solved' *regardless* of benevolence or funding. Can diplomacy or international institutions *help* solve some of these issues? Certainly, but if you Google "UN scandals" you'll be able to observe some epic failures in areas directly related to the international to-do list.

These include the profound ethical failures associated with the U.N.-established Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; the \$10 billion Oil-For-Food scandal; and a history of criminal sexual abuse and war refugee exploitation by U.N. peacekeepers and staff in

the Democratic Republic of Congo, West Africa, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. Consider also the moral leadership of having an anti-paragon of human rights, Libya, as a member of the U.N. Human Rights Council. The U.N., as with its intellectual predecessor, the League of Nations, is an international institution with a mixed record of success regarding *solvable* problems, let alone those that are intractable.

Although the President acknowledged the clear shortfalls inherent in many of our existing international systems, knowing something's wrong is only a small part of the challenge. The bigger test is to troubleshoot the flaws and fix the broken processes to create institutions that *will* work to support U.S. objectives. It isn't difficult to agree there should be few security 'free riders' or that the security burden should not fall nearly so much on the United States, but other issues should be considered as well. These include the ongoing conundrum of non-aligned international goals, funding and funding trade-offs, and even the very efficacy of international institutions. All warrant the President's attention as he works to advance overall U.S. interests.

Mark Stout is a researcher and analyst at Air University's [National Space Studies Center](#) and sometimes posts at the blog [Songs of Space and Nuclear War](#). The opinions expressed here are those of the author alone and may not reflect the views and policies of the US Air Force or the Department of Defense.