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On the Value of Weighted Decisions in UN Voting and Representation

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Previously, she worked in the United Nations Secretariat as a Political Affairs Officer in the Department for Disarmament Affairs, and, before that, as Special Assistant to the Secretary General of the Second World Conference to Combat Racism, and on other human rights issues. She also worked for UNICEF, UNDP, UNEP, and on the staff of Economists for Peace and Security on issues relating to the costs of war and excessive militarization.

There are two main problems with the decisions taken in the United Nations. In the Security Council, UN executive and enforcement actions are often seen as being less than fully legitimate because the member states in the Council do not fairly represent the world community. Some major nations — such as Germany, Japan, India and Brazil — have less say in decisions than their role in international relations merits, while the five victors of the Second World War — China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA — have permanent seats and tend to control the agenda and the decisions taken. At the same time many regions and interests are greatly underrepresented — such as the Arab states, the whole Muslim world, and the continent of Africa.

The overpowering influence of the United States in determining Security Council decisions can have value as in the efforts to stop the genocide in Darfur or the gross violations of human rights in Burma, but the reality of some US unilateral actions undermines the authority of the United States and adds to the problem of a general lack of Council authority because of its unfair system of representation. As a result some Security Council plans are blocked by the veto, and many decisions are ineffective.

Secondly, in the General Assembly, most decisions are only recommendations at a time in history when many people and many nations believe that real governance is needed to address assertively problems such as global warming. It is widely believed that global law addressing global problems should represent the entire world community. While the General Assembly was designed to represent the world community, governments are loath to give major importance to its votes because its one-member-one-vote system means that votes are not in any way proportional to the power and importance of the states and the nations represented.

In view of these inherent problems with the system and the many inconclusive efforts to introduce greater fairness, the Center for War/Peace Studies has embarked on a broad campaign to urge UN member states to consider various proposals for weighted voting and weighted representation. We expect that UN Charter amendment will be needed, and we are asking governments to consider how the existing systems in the GA and the Security Council can be transformed to give all nations a fair shot at contributing to effective global governance. The keen interest of nations in playing a greater role in the Security Council shows that real participation in real decisions is an issue with salience and potential traction. Nonetheless the route from the present system to one that would enable equitable participation and binding decisions is not easy to find. A major topic of discussion in our meetings with diplomats has related to possible methods that would ensure implementation of decisions the General Assembly designates should be “binding” after a Binding Triad vote.

The Binding Triad (BT) proposal for weighted voting in the UN General Assembly was designed by Richard Hudson, who founded the Center for War/Peace Studies, and this plan has been refined through many conferences and discussions with diplomats and experts over the years. Its present formulation is ably presented by a long-time UN legal official, Paul Szasz. His paper “Alternative Voting Systems in International Organizations and the Binding Triad Proposal to Improve U.N. General Assembly Decision-Taking” is at <www.cwps.org>.



The essential idea of the BT proposal is to weight selected major GA voting decisions on three criteria: population, contributions to the UN budget, and the fact that a country is a UN member state. To prevent overwhelming weight being given to any country with a population or a GDP-based UN contribution of more than 15% of the total, the Szasz paper proposes a 15% cap on the weight given to any country in its financial or population criteria of the triad. The vote on BT selected issues would also need to pass on each of the three legs of the triad, thus ensuring that no decision would be taken that did not have the support of countries representing a predetermined majority of the states and a given majority of the people and of the finances of the world organization. This system of counting protects the small nations, but gives credit to the large ones and to the nations that tend to run the world economy. It gives proportional credit and can thus be viewed as fair and democratic because it gives new importance to the people of the nations.

It is not clear at this point whether a new system based on weighted voting could be introduced for the General Assembly without at the same time reforming the Security Council and replacing the veto with a fairer and more equitable allocation of power. Even with such changes in the Council, it would seem useful to significantly change the capacity of the General Assembly. A number of delegations who do not feel themselves adequately entitled to real participation in the Security Council would like the legislative capacities of the GA expanded, and the proposal of the Szasz document is to establish a means for deciding which issues should be voted on for binding legislative effect using the BT weighting system. The idea here is that the General Assembly would assess specific major issues such as the problem of climate change and then agree to use the Binding Triad system of weighting to establish global legislation on the subject after intense negotiation with the help of expert advice. This sort of action would be taken only for major global issues that clearly require global agreement. At the same time, most GA votes would be taken as now with each member state having

an equal voice. These votes would not be binding, except to the same extent as now for some votes affecting the operation of the UN and its budget.

Another approach to weighted voting and weighted representation has been developed by Joseph Schwartzberg, whose document "Universal Regional Representation as a Basis for Security Council Reform" can also be found at <www.cwps.org>. Professor Schwartzberg proposes "a universally representative Security Council with twelve 'regional' seats; four for individual nations (USA, China, India and Japan) and eight for multi-national groupings...." The weights of the voting power of each seat would range from 16.2% for Europe to 14.3% for the United States, 11.1% for China, 8.9% for India, 8.0% for Japan, 7.8% for Latin America, 7.5% for South East Asia, 6.6% for Africa, 6.0% for West Asia, 5.0 % for the Arab League, 4.4% for Russia and 4.3% for the "Westminster League" consisting of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. As with the Binding Triad, the weighting is based on population, UN contributions, and the fact of being a UN member state. However, unlike the proposal of Hudson and Szasz, there is no way in this regional proposal that states with small populations and economies could pool their votes to block decisions sought by larger or richer states; instead each country would be part of a relatively compatible cluster. It might work best to use this regional approach to obtain universal representation in the Security Council, while also giving additional powers to the General Assembly to make binding decisions on selected global issues when there would be three BT-type concurrent majorities.

The Center for War/Peace Studies is asking key UN member states to consider these proposals with a view to designing a system to provide fairer and more participatory United Nations decisions that would constitute a new form of world law for the 21st century. Because the few radical changes ever made in the UN system have been initiated by members of the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement, we have focused on these countries, but have also kept in touch with others.

This has involved meeting with foreign office officials of 17 countries, mostly in their capitals — Bangkok, Bern, Brasilia, Brussels, Budapest, Buenos Aires, Cairo, Islamabad, Jerusalem, Mexico City, Paris, Rome, Santiago, San Jose (Costa Rica), and Ottawa — and with others when they were in New York, such as key officials from the UK and from South Africa. We have also met with the diplomats posted to the UN in New York from China, Croatia, India, Japan, Jordan, Germany, Netherlands, Nigeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, Senegal, and Sweden.

Several CW/PS Board members have undertaken the visits to UN diplomats in New York and in their capitals, including Ambassador Azmat Hassan in New York and Islamabad, and Board Chairman Hamilton Kean in New York and Bangkok, and most notably Board Vice Chairman, Mike Kronisch. Mike was assisted by Juan Federer in Santiago and also in Paris where they were joined by Eddie DeBotton. In Brasilia, Sheila Kronisch accompanied Mike and took notes; in Mexico City, both David Emert and Francisco Plancarta participated; while in Ottawa, Fergus Watt arranged the visit and participated. In New York, Lucy Law Webster, Juan Federer, Azmat Hassan, and Hamilton Kean have been actively involved in the visits and discussions.

Before and during our visits with diplomats in New York and in their capitals, we urged them to view the CW/PS DVD on weighted voting, and we have also circulated this to academic and civil society groups in countries worldwide.

For one or several copies of the DVD mentioned above, please contact the **Center for War Peace Studies**, 330 East 38th Street, Suite 19Q, New York, NY 10016.