

STUDY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

for

TRANSFORMING THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM: DESIGNS FOR A WORKABLE WORLD

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Unit 2: Reform of the General Assembly (p. 13-35)

Why Is This Important (p. 13-15)

The General Assembly (GA) is the UN's main deliberative body. Its membership, now 193 nations (originally 51), is virtually universal, accounting for 99.6% of humanity. Each member nation has one vote. Despite its universality, the allocation of power in the GA fails to reflect the distribution of power in the world outside the UN itself. Many GA resolutions are mere exercises in political posturing. They are non-binding, accorded little respect and routinely flouted. A more rational, realistic, decision-making system is urgently needed.

Key Issues (p. 15-20)

As GA membership expanded, its political orientation changed. Its early years were marked by the opposition of Eastern and Western blocs; but decolonization, mainly in the 1960s, led to more frequent confrontation between the economically powerful North and the numerically preponderant, more populous and politically weak South. The initial dominance of the United States and its allies steadily declined. The bloc of developing countries known as the G-77 (now 131 nations) can now marshal the two-thirds voting majority needed to win votes on a wide range of issues. But the veto power exercised by any one or more of the five leading powers (P-5) on the Security Council often nullifies the GA's non-binding decisions. On issues deemed important to them, powerful nations frequently resort to questionable tactics: bribery, threats, economic sanctions and so forth to influence the votes of the economically weak.

Possible Solutions (p. 21-33)

1. Implementing an effective system of weighted voting based on principles that are reasonably fair and politically acceptable. (p. 21-25)

Needed conditions:

- based on clear and valid principles
- relatively simple
- objectively determined
- applied equally to all members

- **flexible** (*responding automatically to demographic, economic and political changes*)
- **nuanced**
- **realistic** (*having a meaningful relationship to the distribution of power outside the UN arena*)

Basic principles, each with equal weight, to be included in a weighted voting formula:

- **democratic/demographic** (i.e., population)
- **economic capacity to be effective**, (based on contributions to the UN budget) (*allocated in direct proportion to Gross National Income [GNI]; discussed in detail in Chapter 11*).
- **legal/sovereign equality of nations**, *all nations being counted equally*.

QUESTIONS:

1. *Do you agree that weighted voting based on a simple mathematical formula will yield a fairer and better distribution of power than the present one-nation-one-vote system? If so, why? If not, why not?*
2. *Are the weighted voting conditions noted above both necessary and sufficient for their intended purpose? If not, what would you add or eliminate?*
3. *Why do you suppose the three basic principles noted above were assigned equal weight? In particular, how do you view the “sovereign equality of nations?”*
4. *If you objected to the three considerations in the recommended formula having equal weight, would a provision for periodic reconsideration of the weights take care of your concerns?*
5. *Should other measurable factors also be considered? If so, what would you recommend?*

2. **Endowing the GA with a limited capacity to pass legally binding resolutions, rather than restricting it solely to a recommendatory role.**
(p. 26-33)

The GA's role would be limited to important matters of global or international concern. Passage of relevant resolutions would require approval by nations with a combined voting weight of at least two-thirds of those present and voting and with a combined population of at

least half of all nations present and voting. On some issues (e.g., authorizing peacekeeping operations) larger super-majorities might be required.

QUESTIONS:

- 1. Why is the ability to pass binding resolutions important? How would it affect national sovereignty?**
- 2. Can a resolution be truly “binding” if the UN has no effective enforcement capability?**
- 3. Although implementing the recommendations in this chapter would result in increased UN dues for virtually all UN members, there would also be significant economic rewards. What might those rewards be?**
- 4. What other benefits might member nations and the world as a whole derive from the proposed changes?**
- 5. How can UN member nations, each with its own vested interests and short-range worldview, be persuaded to support the proposed changes? (This will be further discussed in Unit 15).**



United Nations headquarters buildings in mid-town New York