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Reforming the United Nations and Building Cooperation Towards Peace and Security

Today, Australians, Americans, and people of other nations world-wide are remaining very focused on responding to the humanitarian disaster arising from the earthquake and the tsunami which occurred on December 26. We can scarcely believe the staggering numbers of people who were killed from so many nations in the Indian Ocean Rim. So many people have been displaced, losing loved ones and losing their livelihoods. This is so even when one has seen the devastation first-hand, as I did when I visited Thailand and Indonesia two weeks ago to offer Australia's support and assistance. Your own Secretary of State Colin Powell had a similar response when he also visited around the same time, saying he had never seen anything like it in all of his experience of natural disasters. He and I were together at the summit in Jakarta subsequently.

The scale of the devastation has prompted a show of generosity and support which, I think, has been as impressive as it has been necessary. The scale has also dictated that assistance and cooperation between nations and the international community will be needed in many of the affected areas for years to come. The events of December 26 and the subsequent humanitarian crises have also highlighted the vital importance of nations, regions and, more broadly, the international community, continuing all efforts to find the most effective ways to build security and greater prosperity, whether in the face of natural or man-made threats and crises.

Today I would like to look at an issue which directly relates to how nations and the broader international community are able to safeguard and restore peace and prosperity. An issue which has been a topic of much discussion, work and diplomacy over the past year: the reform of the United Nations. In using the phrase "reform of the United Nations" I want to stress that it is shorthand for efforts to fundamentally change our system of global governance rather than simply a reference to the admittedly laudable, but much more modest, goal of

promoting a more efficient United Nations Secretariat through improvements in management.

The fundamental focus of Australia's foreign policy is on achieving outcomes. That's the Australian way of looking at things—just being practical in finding solutions. In this case, the focus is on achieving outcomes that enhance our security and prosperity. Thus, the Government's foreign policy has been overwhelmingly pragmatic, utilizing variously bilateral, regional and sometimes multilateral approaches to achieve the outcomes that we have sought. In Australia, we recognize that a rules-based international system has delivered a great deal over the years by way of stability and security.

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Indeed, I come to foreign policy, as I suppose all of you do, with an abiding belief in the need for a rules-based system, but one which is flexible enough to find a balance between respect for sovereignty and the reinforcement of human rights, democracy and freedom. Australia, the United States and many others rightly recognize that the international legal system—with the body of the United Nations at its core—retains a unique and important role in international efforts to address contemporary threats. Similarly, the United States—a country whose support and leadership remains critical to the United Nations—

and Australia wish to see a United Nations system that is effective and efficient, that's responsive and that's relevant in the face of contemporary threats, that is, able to give optimal



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lead in certain situations. This point of view has been clearly endorsed by the report of the U.N. High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. I'll talk about that a little later, but one of its central themes is the urgent need for greater interaction between the United Nations system and effective regional activities conducted by individual nations. From my own experience as Foreign Minister, I can say that acting with partners in our region and also globally to build peace and security, in line, of course, with the international system and international law, has shown itself to be a positive and a successful strategy. A very current example is the partnership we have established with Indonesia to assist with the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Aceh following the tsunami. Australia is contributing \$1 billion (Australian) to the partnership—our largest-ever single aid initiative—and

through that partnership, Australia and Indonesia will work closely to plan and implement the programs to rebuild and recover communities in Aceh. Australia and Indonesia agree that the partnership provides the best means for us to cooperate and achieve results in response to the disaster.

In the Pacific, Australia has been working closely with some of our regional neighbors—countries like New Zealand and some of the island states in the Pacific—to restore law and order in the Solomon Islands to get that country back on its feet. We've established something called RAMSI – the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands. We have sent in some of our troops and have sent in a considerable number of police to really put that country back on its feet. Now,

in a very real sense, that's an example, in this case, of the South Pacific region acting collectively to address a regional problem as neighbors extending a helping hand.

In 1999, Australia helped to quickly mobilize and then command an international force to restore order in East Timor, and subsequently a U.N. peacekeeping operation came in demonstrating how our national capabilities and willingness to act in concert with others helped bring security and stability to a significant part of our region.

Australia's success in building regional cooperation on counter-terrorism is another example of how the resourcefulness and flexibility of nations is crucial in the contemporary security environment. On countering WMD proliferation, collective actions by nations are also proving successful and are complementing efforts that are made through major multilateral bodies like the International Atomic Energy Agency. There is, for example, the Proliferation Security Initiative—an endeavour closely involving both of our countries—which is actively working to impede illicit and illegal movements and the transfer of WMD material and technologies.

These are just a few important examples illustrating the critical role and responsibility of nations, and sometimes groups of nations within a particular region, to promote peace and security in their own right, and in doing so bolstering the international system. In these cases, the United Nations has been a supporter but has not been a central player. So these examples illustrate effective ways to promote regional peace and security, but we do recognize that there also is a role to bring urgent and lasting reform to the United Nations itself.

assistance to the needy and vulnerable, as well as ensuring that responsible nation-states are supported as they endeavour to build peace and security.

From Australia's point of view, the magnitude and complexity of the challenges at hand also necessitate action by nations and regions, with the United Nations system not expected and, frankly, not able to carry full responsibility for such endeavors—whether in its current form, or as a reformed and revitalized entity in the future, particularly where we—nations individually and sometimes regions collectively—may have the resources, capacity and willingness to contribute. Indeed, it may be the case that nations are uniquely placed to respond to situations. It's more appropriate that nations and regions should take the

The nations of the world face challenges to international peace and prosperity that are very different than those which existed at the birth of the United Nations in San Francisco nearly 60 years ago. Today, the menace of terrorism and the dangers of the proliferation of WMD cast their

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shadows across the globe, threatening not only our security, but the development gains and future prosperity of nations. And it is this new environment, this new reality, to which we must all adjust. The United Nations is no exception. It is a very important institution that does great humanitarian work, but there is an urgent, practical need to strengthen its capacity to deal effectively and relevantly with the problems we now face, or it runs the risk that, as an institution, it will slide into irrelevance. I think personally that would be to the detriment of all nations and peoples.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan recognized this in 2003 when he said "we have come to a fork in the road, a moment no less decisive than 1945 itself, when the U.N. was first founded." And the Secretary-General responded by announcing the establishment of what I referred to earlier, the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, which

brought together experts and practitioners from around the world, including my predecessor, former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, and gave them a mandate to study and make recommendations on the major issues facing the United Nations and its member states. We welcomed from the outset this high-level panel process and, in fact, we provided financial support to make the work of the High-Level Panel possible because we judge that the process represents the best prospect for urgently repositioning the United Nations system to meet contemporary challenges. We are concerned about the long-term implications for the global system if this reform opportunity is lost.

Just a few weeks ago, this panel produced its report and I am pleased to be able to say that our hopes for an ambitious and bold report have been largely met. Of course, this is not to say that we agree with all the elements of the report. But we do think it provides a firm, practical and sensible basis for further planning, discussion and action. The panel's report itself contains 101 recommendations for what we in Australia term institutional and doctrinal reforms.

Let me turn now to some of these specific recommendations made by the panel, and I'll say something about our initial thinking on how they may help address the challenges facing the international community today—beginning with some key institutional issues.

Successive Australian governments have long advocated expanding the permanent membership of the Security Council since we're never going to get a veto in the Security Council without expanding the veto. We believe that the Security Council's permanent membership should include Japan, India, Brazil, an African country, which would presumably be Nigeria because it's the most populous country in sub-saharan Africa, and possibly Indonesia. As an important multilateral institution, the Security Council needs to be representative of the world as it actually is, not just an organization which represents the sum of the victors of World War II, which, of course, excludes from permanent membership those two countries which were the enemies during the Second World War. Of course, those countries are allies of ours today. So, the Panel has recommended these changes and we, frankly, support those changes and welcome the panel's efforts to address this difficult issue.

But while possible models have been proposed, we recognize that

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finding a solution which is acceptable to all of these national communities will not be easy. There will be lots of countries that think they should be permanent members of the Security Council. There are a lot of regional jealousies, and there's a lot of regional

competitiveness which will make it difficult to sort out the expansion of the permanent membership. It will be important that there be criteria for Security Council membership, especially for any new permanent seats that may be created. The Panel's focus on the contributions that aspirants may have made to the United Nations financially, militarily and diplomatically is, I think, a sound basis for taking this aspect of reform forward.

Australia has also long argued that the United Nations' electoral system needs to be updated to reflect changes in the international system. The electoral system as it currently stands reflects the Cold War. The old divide between East and West Europe should be adapted to reflect the new converging European reality. The Panel's proposals for a distribution of Council seats between four new major regional electoral groups—with Australia to join the Asia Pacific group is—I think, a good start and one that we strongly support.

As I outlined earlier in my presentation, Australia has been closely involved in recent years in activities designed to help states build peace and prosperity. We are also well aware of the actual and potential vulnerabilities to security and stability posed by weak and failing states—whether in terms of vulnerability to transnational crimes, including, most importantly, terrorism, or the problems of poor governance and corruption. As such, I'm particularly interested in the Panel's bold proposal to establish a peace-building commission—a commission that would assist countries under stress and at risk of sliding towards failure, as well as those emerging from conflict. While work

needs to be done to flesh out the detail of this substantial institutional reform, the concept appears to merit consideration. Should this idea gain currency, and I think it probably will, I

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believe there would be much that Australia could contribute.

Promotion of and respect for human rights also forms an important part of the Panel's report and has been an important part of the United Nations' objectives over many years. As recent events such as the humanitarian disaster in Darfur or the situation in Zimbabwe have underlined, respect for human rights remains a precondition for the establishment of peace and security. Australia held, during the course of last year, the presidency of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and it argued that it is now appropriate to look at how that Commission—as the premier multilateral human rights institution—can better fulfill the purposes for which it was created. The Panel's recommendation that the Commission's membership be universal could be one way of achieving this. At the moment the membership is limited;

however, such a change would need to be part of a wider reform process so as to avoid duplication within the United Nations' human rights machinery.

I would like to now look at some of what we have termed the doctrinal recommendations proposed by the Panel. Humanitarian disasters in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and, more recently, Darfur have underlined the urgent need for the international community to develop a better framework for responding to man-made humanitarian crises. The Panel makes a welcome contribution to the international dialogue on what sometimes is called the "Responsibility to Protect" concept of humanitarian intervention, a concept that has been developing in international relations over recent years. This

concept has at its core the idea that the international community has a collective responsibility to protect civilian populations in the event of humanitarian crises which national governments have been powerless or, frankly, in some cases, unwilling to prevent. I think that the Panel is correct in assessing that the future legitimacy and credibility of the Security Council will depend in large measure on the United Nations Security Council's ability to take effective and timely action regarding large-scale man-made humanitarian crises such as Darfur.

I am also pleased that the Panel report clearly recognizes the threat to international peace and security posed by the threat of the spread of weapons of mass destruction. We support the Panel's conclusion that the Security Council should play a more active and resolute role in promoting WMD non-proliferation, including by taking action

where there is serious concern over non-compliance. If the Security Council's membership is to expand, it is essential that all new permanent members be fully committed to more resolute action by the Council to act against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

I also endorse the Panel's recommendation that the United Nations should promote a comprehensive strategy for combating transnational terrorism. Terrorism has been substantially left to individual nations to face, in particular the United States, but also the United States' allies. The United Nations has to do even more than it has already done to address this. All of that is consistent with Australia's approach, set out in a White Paper produced recently by the Australian government on transnational terrorism. Such a strategy should, as noted by the Panel, look at the development of better instruments for global counter-terrorism cooperation, including completion of negotiation of an effective and comprehensive convention on terrorism, and the implementation of existing counter-terrorism standards, not just by a handful of countries, but by all states.

At the same time, and as Australia knows from its own experience with countries in our own immediate neighborhood, capacity-building and other cooperation at bilateral and regional levels is always going to play a critical role in the international counter-terrorism effort, delivering practical outcomes reflecting local conditions. As such, I believe that we should also encourage further United Nations efforts to facilitate and support such activities.

Finally, I think the Panel should be praised for tackling one of the most difficult issues of our time, namely the

use of force by states and the role of the Security Council in authorizing military action. The Panel correctly acknowledges that Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter empowers the Security Council to address the full range of security threats with which states are concerned. But the real challenge remains for the Security Council to face up to its role and responsibility in addressing international threats to peace and security, essentially, to be more proactive in addressing contemporary threats such terrorism and weapons of mass destruction proliferation and to take much more decisive action a great deal earlier.

The report and its key recommendations are then, I think, very welcome. But they are part of an urgent and ongoing project, and not ends in themselves. And building and keeping momentum for reform remains absolutely crucial. I am pleased that officials have already met in Mexico. There's a group called "Friends of U.N. Reform" of 20 countries that just met. Later this year there will be a heads of governments summit, to be held in September, and that will be critical to the United Nations reform process. Development issues, of course, will be high on the summit's agenda, but United Nations reform must be a key issue at that summit. The gathering will provide an important forum to carry forward those recommendations in the High-Level Panel's report which are workable and capable of attracting broad support. It is important that all U.N. member states

give support and cooperation to the reform process—not least because it is important for members of the international community to have a better functioning and more relevant U.N. And in terms of talking to the good citizens of an important U.N. member state, which is why I'm here today, I trust that what I have said about the reform process will dispel any notion that this is a theoreticians' debate, esoteric or academic in nature, and have underlined that it is—and must remain—a combined effort by experts, practitioners, politicians and the international community to arrive at practical and pragmatic outcomes.

In conclusion, let me come back to where I began—the Australia-U.S. bilateral relationship. To my mind, this is a relationship that embodies many of the qualities that are essential to make a broader international community work effectively: unbending support for and

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promotion of freedom and democracy; true bonds of partnership and cooperation; a relationship of mutual understanding but also respect for differences and capacity to compromise; and a genuine willingness to work together to achieve international peace and security, regardless of the complexities of the challenges at hand. So much of what

we, Australia and the United States, are doing together globally, regionally and bilaterally helps to demonstrate this. On Iraq, both our nations appreciate the importance of staying the course and helping democracy take root. The United States remains a key partner for Australia and the Asia-Pacific region in the ongoing campaign against international terrorism, as it does in our efforts to address weapons of mass destruction proliferation.

In early 2004 we finalized the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement, and on the first of January this year the agreement entered into force. With this forward-looking and

dynamic agreement in place, our economies and our business people have unprecedented opportunities and conditions to trade, invest and grow together. Most recently, Australia and the United States have sprung into action to assist those communities in the Indian Ocean affected by the tsunami. Our military personnel are working side by side in Sumatra to deliver the urgently needed assistance. We've had national elections in both our countries over the last year, and let me take this opportunity in the one really formal speech I'll be making here in the United States this week to congratulate President George Bush on his re-election. Over the president's

first term it has been a pleasure and an honor to enjoy excellent cooperation and friendship with Secretary of State Colin Powell. We thank him for his energy and support over a busy and challenging period.

I am sure the period ahead will provide many opportunities for our excellent cooperation to be enhanced, and thank you again to the World Affairs Council and its members for the opportunity to share some views with you today on this admittedly complex but nevertheless important subject of the reform of the United Nations.

Thank you.

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