



**Women's Foreign Policy Group
United Nations Study Visit
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Session I: Current U.S.–UN Relations under Ban Ki-Moon

Ambassador Alejandro Wolff

Deputy Ambassador of the United States to the United Nations

Maxine Isaacs: Good morning and welcome to our members, Board members and friends. I am Maxine Isaacs, Chair of the Women's Foreign Policy Group Board. The Women's Foreign Policy Group promotes global engagement and women's leadership and women's voices on the pressing international issues of the day.

We are thrilled that you could all join us for our third annual Women's Foreign Policy Group UN Study Visit, a day-long series of briefings on the UN in the second year of Ban Ki-Moon's leadership with a group of senior-level UN officials as speakers. We have a fantastic turnout today with representatives from the UN missions, consulates, UN family, foreign policy organizations, think-tanks, NGOs, foundations, corporations, and the media.

I would like to begin by introducing our wonderful President, Patricia Ellis, who makes this train run and a co-founder of the organization and the Women's Foreign Policy Group Board members who are here today, please raise your hands when I say your name: Donna Constantinople, Theresa Loar, Ann Korologos, and Gillian Sorenson. Thank you all for being here.

It is now my very great pleasure to introduce my wonderful friend Melinda Blinken. She is one of the co-sponsors of today's event and she serves on many boards including the H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment. Melinda will introduce our moderator today, who will be our moderator throughout the day, Gillian Sorensen. Thank you very much.

Melinda Blinken: It's always a pleasure to introduce a friend, especially to this group, and a great friend to New York and to the UN. Gillian, as we just heard, is a member of the WFPG Board and was formerly UN Assistant Secretary-General for External Relations; Special Adviser to the Secretary-General for Public Policy and New York City Commissioner for the UN. She now serves as Senior Advisor for the UN Foundation and a national advocate and speaker on the United Nations and on US-UN relations.

Gillian Sorensen: Well good morning everybody and thank you for that generous introduction Melinda, and thank you to our Chair, Maxine, and to Pat Ellis and the leadership of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. I will take this opportunity as a long-time UN official to say welcome. We are very glad to have you in the building. I feel very lucky that our opening speaker this morning is Alejandro Wolff, better known here as "Alex" Wolff, the Deputy Permanent Representative – that is the Deputy Ambassador of the United States to the United Nations. He is the quintessential career Foreign Service Officer. It has been his lifetime career. He has served in many different countries: Algeria, Morocco, Chile, Cypress, in Belgium, and four years in Paris. He has worked in the State Department as key advisor under two Secretaries of State and more recently as the Deputy Permanent Representative here. In that capacity he has, in the interim, between Ambassador Bolton and Ambassador Khalilzad, he was our ambassador and it looks as though he will be fulfilling that role yet again because Khalilzad is departing. So again you may be covering as long as half a year between the two ambassadors. So we thank you very much for coming. The U.S.-UN relationship, as everyone knows has had its ups and downs over these many years. We hope that the breach will be repaired, that we can understand each other better, and strengthen this very valuable relationship. With that I thank you for coming.

Ambassador Alejandro Wolff: Thank you very much and it's a pleasure to be with you. As you were describing the U.S.-UN relationship I was thinking of an analogy I once used with my wife, trying to describe it as a relationship like a long standing marriage: we are committed to each other, we love each other, we know each other's foibles and flaws and irritate each other enormously. She did not like the analogy and I promised I would not use it again so please don't repeat that. (*laughter*)

Ms. Sorensen: And divorce is not an option.

Ambassador Wolff: And divorce is not an option, exactly; we're committed to each other. Well thank you, it's a pleasure to be with you and I know you're all probably keen to ask some questions. This is a group I'm going to address in a different way.

I still find a substantial degree of ignorance, fundamental ignorance about the organization: what it is, how it was conceived, what it can and can't do, how it's divided up, what the Secretariat is, what the General Assembly is, what the Security Council is – all of you who follow these issues and are our most informed public I think may encounter that a bit as well – but one of the big frustrations I have is that for much of the American public, the *informed* public as well, the UN is Secretary-General (SG) Ban Ki-Moon, that's the UN. The limitations to what the SG can do in addressing the core political issues, core issues that we deal with, are substantial. I think that he and the Secretariat, and therefore the organization get a bum rap. There are many things that are not his fault, that are not the fault of the Secretariat, that are simply a lack of political will or common approach or understanding by member states, who really run the organization.

The one thing that in my preparation to come here, a little over two years ago – you can

imagine when you're going to have to confront a confirmation hearing with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, you really prepare – but one thing that nobody prepared me for or really spoke to me about was the sense of polarization that exists in the organization, particularly between developing and developed countries. I don't know whether that was because people didn't appreciate it or that it was part of the landscape but it's the most perplexing element for me and difficult element for us to overcome. A lot of it has to do with structural issues that have very little to do with the United States. It simply has to do with the fact that the United States is the greatest individual power in the world and everyone attributes motives, capabilities, and intentions to us as a result. And I'm an old political scientist, I see it in action here: everyone sort of gathers together to contain us, to limit us, in an organization where everyone has one vote in the General Assembly, and therefore numbers matter. And if you have numbers who coalesce against you for any reason, it's hard to overcome.

We approach the UN from a different perspective. We see it as an opportunity to leverage our values and interests and try to have the international community, through the UN, support our efforts. So you got us – moving in the direction of how to make the UN look a lot more like us – and you have the rest of the UN saying, "how do we keep them from making us look like them?". That underlying division we encounter on budget issues, we encounter it on social issues, we encounter it on political issues, and it's a difficult pattern of behavior to overcome. The one saving grace is my own background is essentially in bi-lateral work and my work with a number of Secretaries of State and traveling extensively with two of them – three of them actually, both parties. What we see here in the UN playing out, in my opinion is not reflective of the reality of how our bi-lateral relations are evolving and how our relations with actual regions are evolving. When you engage outside the UN with the very same countries, with the very same groups of countries, it's a different dynamic, it's a more practical dynamic: how can we cooperate, how can we reinforce each other's efforts, how do we tackle the common threats, how do we pursue a common agenda. Here it's different. It's almost disembodied to a large extent from the real relationships that we know exists with most of the countries that we deal with here and that dynamic can be explained in a number of ways. This is a place where individuals matter; you have very capable individuals with individual backgrounds – not all of them diplomatic, a lot of them political. It's a place where if you look carefully, scratch the surface, you find that some of the permanent representatives are opposition leaders, who are better kept out of the country. Some of them are close friends or relatives of the leader, some of them are contenders for the same party that's in power. So they come here and this is a platform, this is a media center, this is an opportunity to make their way back to a leadership position in their own country. It's a different agenda, it's a different sort of mindset and therefore the sort of point scoring that goes on here – all too often in my opinion – is a function more of that dynamic than it is about any underlying reality to the relationship.

Now, the issues we're working on are the ones you know well: whether it's issues like development or climate change or reform of the organization – which I'm happy to take questions on as well – or the harder core geopolitical issues that tend to focus the work of the Security Council. We just finished a brutal session yesterday on renewal of the

mandate on MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), the Western Sahara peacekeeping operation. Darfur, Haiti, Lebanon, the Middle East, Zimbabwe, Burma, a number of issues are ones that we're having concerted effort to raise interest in and attention on and not always easily. There are different views on the Council, between the permanent five members and the elected ten members on what the Council should be doing. Should it be involved in human rights? We had a discussion yesterday, as I mentioned, on the Western Sahara. It was a debate about whether to incorporate a reference to human rights. The Russian Federation said that "We do not believe that human rights belong in the Security Council, that's not what we do. They are not peacekeeping and security issues, we should not be addressing them". You can imagine then when we deal on issues like Burma or Zimbabwe, it makes it very, very hard. So it's a constant slog.

I do believe and am convinced and I know everyone in our Mission is, from Ambassador Khalilzad on down, that the UN is good for the United States. It is an organization that allows us to do things we could not do on our own, allows us to do things with others that would otherwise be very hard to do with others, provides a legitimacy for steps that we take in defense of the international system, of international law, and offers a venue for countries that don't often have a voice in world affairs to speak up and feel like they play a role – that's usually good. I think people here give the United States a bum rap in terms of what our interaction is. I am utterly convinced having watched how we operate here and having received instructions on a range of issues – not all of them I feel comfortable with but all of them I execute – the U.S. really wants this place to work. It reminds me of when I served in Brussels in our mission to the EU. The British were constantly being pilloried for being anti-EU because they asked tough questions in the meetings: "How is the money being spent? Are we seeing the returns? Should we be involved in this? Should we be involved in that? Why is this happening?" For a number of countries – particularly those whose pocketbooks are not affected directly – those questions aren't particularly salient or interesting. We do the same thing here. We are the largest single funder of the organization, as you know. We are assessed at 22% of the regular budget. We are assessed at 27% – although we pay, alas regrettably, 25% – of the peacekeeping budget.

The statistic I like to show to give you a sense also of how the dynamics operate is: the second largest contributor is Japan; the third largest contributor is Germany. Together, with the United States, the three of us provide almost 50% of the entire assessed budget of the organization of 192 countries. By the way, as a footnote: Japan and Germany are two of the countries against which this organization was founded. They were the two enemy states in the charter and today, two of the most responsible actors in the international arena.

We have, with the EU and most of the other OECD countries, let's say about 35 of us, pay about 80% to 82% of the entire budget. On the other side of the coin, you have got mainly the G77, a group of about 132 countries with which China associates itself often. Collectively, excluding China – but that's only by about a percentage and a half – those 132 countries account for maybe 10% of the entire budget. And that has real meaning

whether you're looking at how a family unit operates or a national unit or an international unit and I've had representatives from very prominent, very large developing countries, leaders in the G77, tell me point blank, "Alex, we will vote for whatever spending initiative is put on the table because we don't have to pay for it". That's frustrating but it's honest. I'd rather someone tell me that than something else. Then of course we are the ones who are concerned about budgetary discipline. The budget this year, when all is said and done, will increase by about 25% over the last bi-annual (we do our budgets every two years).

We're not saying don't fund new programs. We're not saying don't increase funding for good programs. We're saying you just can't continually add. You've got to prioritize, you've got to eliminate duplication, and you've got to address waste. But it's very hard because duplication translates into jobs. One of the things that I find quite telling also is the number of delegation members who crave tax-free jobs in New York when they leave their delegations. So there's a built-in disincentive to discipline the system because if you're looking for jobs in the system, why would you want to cut the number of jobs available. That's an exaggerated point but it's not an unreal point. We often find ourselves, despite our best efforts, isolated on these issues, particularly the funding issues. There are a lot of reasons for that. One of them is the exchange rate when you take that 25% over two years in a dollar-denominated budget. If you're a Euro-denominated country, over that same two years, maybe you appreciated by about 25% so you're not seeing any growth; you have no problem with that budget; anything else would be a reduction of what you contribute. So our natural allies on this subject – other contributors who have a stake in it – don't feel the same pinch that we do. Also they're probably more prone to fund it anyway, for a number of reasons.

The other dynamic that I find interesting here has to do with the end of the Cold War. There used to be a big overlay with anything that happened in the UN for its first four decades of existence. Each decade of its first 40 years or so, it experienced about 50 vetoes in the Security Council. Since the end of the Cold War, we're down to about 11 a decade, so that means that we're more functional, we're operating better. But also during that Cold War period, the East-West divide masked the North-South divide and we lined up more or less East-West. In that period, with the EU, the United States and the Western European countries in particular, tended to act in tandem on a lot of issues. We banded together and we didn't necessarily agree 100% but there was a mutually reinforcing exercise. That's changed. The EU is seeking a role for itself and that self-defined role, in many instances, is bridge-builder: the one who can identify the compromise so we can all move forward together. A laudable position to be in except for one little problem: it tends to ignore substance. If all you're looking for is how you bridge between whatever there is, you don't care necessarily what the position is. The other problem is that even if the positions are not that far apart, they need to find somebody to bridge between, and guess who's on one end? And as a result, we always tend to be pushed to the outlier position because whatever our position is, vis-à-vis other groups of countries, if someone's trying to bridge that position, they're trying to squeeze in between you. As a result it is another problem we have that I think is more structural than is necessarily related to the merits of the positions we uphold and pursue and it creates this image of a United States that is out

of step, of a United States that is hostile to the organization, of a United States that somehow has lost touch with the rest of the international community.

Let me stop there. I think that's probably enough food for thought and I'd be happy to address any questions.

Questions and Answer:

Ms. Sorensen: Thank you Ambassador. I know we have lots of questions. I'll take the liberty as moderator to try the first one and then open this up. You put some stress on the dues issue and you mentioned that the United States is the largest funder. We know that's true in theory, but not in practice because the United States has been so delinquent in payment of its dues and those have accrued to more than 2 billion dollars of unpaid dues, both the regular dues and the voluntary contributions to peacekeeping operations that we have also have as arrears. So, what credibility does the United States have to press budget discipline on the rest of the organization?

Ambassador Wolff: I knew you were going to ask that question (laughter). You know, the question's not uncomfortable, the answer is uncomfortable. First of all, one of the things that also bedevils me is, we really don't have good figures on what exactly we mean by arrears. We are pilloried for a huge number. You heard 2 billion. We have one problem that, from my understanding of the situation, explains a huge part of it in terms of the criticism that we get in the UN and that's with our assessed budget. We know our fiscal year. Our fiscal year starts October 1st. The UN works on a calendar year: January 1st through December 31st. Sometime in the early eighties, if I'm not mistaken, David Stockman, when he was trying to work some budget magic, decided that we would skip one year of funding. Let me summarize this very quickly: because our fiscal year starts October 1st, we would have budgeted for 2008 the previous year, in 2007, for the fiscal year that began October 1, 2007 and we would have been able to pay that money upfront – early – because it would have been budgeted already. By skipping that year, he sort of was able to show that the U.S. budget expenditures went down and was able then still to pay in the year that we were assessed, but we were not budgeted to do so until the last two, three months of the year. So for that entire January through October period, we didn't pay a penny and we paid a lump sum, essentially, at the end of the year. Now, here's a point of debate: are we in arrears for 2007 if we pay in 2007 but haven't paid in January of 2007? That is the bulk of that 2 billion in my understanding.

Now we are constrained by Congress – and this is not the Administration's position – on peacekeeping. We're assessed at 27%, we pay only at 25%. The Administration is trying to get that reversed so we can make that shortfall and that's not insignificant. We talk a lot about the assessed budget but the peacekeeping budget is about three times the assessed budget, it dwarfs it and we do not have any of the same controls or rigor over the peacekeeping budget that we insist on having over the smaller budget, which is the assessed budget. That accumulates, there is interest on that 2% gap on a 7 billion dollar

annual peacekeeping budget over ten years – or whatever it is – starts to really add up.

Then we have withholdings: conscious decisions by the Administration not to pay for certain things. We are constrained by Congress not to pay for certain things: the Durban Conference, the Durban II Conference – that's something that we won't pay for: if it's adopted as part of the budget, we'll vote against it, it will pass anyway, somebody will calculate how much that's supposed to cost and we reduce our proportional share of that. I think early last month we decided and announced that we would not fund the Human Rights Council so someone will figure out what that amount is and we will withhold it. That is a technical breach of our obligation, but politically, it's a decision that, because of the numbers problem we have here and the ideology that plays out here, we have things that we conclude are just so dysfunctional, so inappropriate, that we can't justify funding it. You can agree or disagree with that. We probably won't resolve it here. This accumulation of issues comes to these very substantial arrears. Nonetheless we still are the biggest contributor, even with those arrears.

Question: I'm Theresa Loar with the Women's Foreign Policy Group Board. What changes have you seen with the U.S. relationship with the UN under Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon?

Ambassador Wolff: It's a good question. I'm not one who is very prone to personalizing relations. We have institutional or structural issues. He oversees the Secretariat, there is a UN approach. Nonetheless, personalities matter, on both sides of the equation. Our relationship with Kofi Annan soured, regrettably, towards the end of his term and whenever you have a selection for a new Secretary-General, the United States, like the other four permanent members are really in a privileged position because you can't get a new Secretary-General unless those five agree. That means that, for the most part, you're looking at individuals that at least early in their tenure, at least in their campaign, are suggesting they agree a lot with you so they get your support. But there is I think something interesting I've observed in the way Ban Ki-Moon operates and his background. It is different than other Secretary-Generals that we've had, or at least that I've been familiar with. He comes from South Korea. South Korea is a country, whose freedom, whose independence is largely a function of its relationship with the United States and the UN. The Korean War was the only time prior to the first Gulf War, the only time in the entire history of the UN, where the UN actually went in on an operation under Chapter 7 to restore peace and not just do peacekeeping but to get engaged in conflict over it. So his view of the organization, and of the U.S. role, not only in the organization but in the world, given our relationship with South Korea since then, is different. I don't see any hang-ups about the argument that any of us hold dear and that is that U.S. power can be a force for good in the world, that nuclear weapons were not ipso facto immoral, that U.S. force projection, presence in countries like South Korea, actually defends freedom and liberty. So he doesn't come with any of that baggage that says whatever the U.S. does is inherently imperialistic or has a selfish motive, etc., and I find that very healthy because in tackling a number of problems around the world he just doesn't recoil from the notion that sometimes you need power to deal with problems or the image of power, or the backing of power to deal with problems. He encountered it, he

believes in it, he identifies with countries that are in difficult regions, who are isolated, who are alone, and who want to develop. So I find that, not that there was any reason Kofi Annan would oppose us on any issue but you don't have to go through the explanation as much and you don't have to go through the rationalization as much. He is a man who has had an uneven start, in my opinion, not of his fault. He came in, having been Foreign Minister of South Korea, used to having an instruction given in the morning and having it executed by the time he went home – very simple. He didn't have the questions about ethics that he finds here, exceptions to every rule, bureaucracy – and I know bureaucracy, I'm part of one – that is very clever on figuring out how to wait people out or making sure that decisions don't always get executed as the boss wants and this is an organization like others, maybe more difficult because it's more diffuse. So, in my opinion, he's been frustrated in the length of time it takes to get things done and probably also surprised, as I was, at how difficult it is to have basic common sense proposals get through member states who are having a power play between them.

Question: Consul General of Austria, Brigitta Blaha, I thought it was very interesting to hear you talk about the dynamics of the countries and how they deal with each other inside and outside the UN. And it seems like it's damaging to this organization that they do behave differently here. Do you see anyway to reconcile this? How to make it better?

Ambassador Wolff: I have some radical ideas that are therefore by definition are impractical. I think that with each new Secretary-General that arrives we should have a house cleaning of all the permanent representatives and have new ones show up, so none of them have any baggage and none of them have any scores to settle and none of them have any personal agenda that they're trying to reopen and then have people come in and understand – without that baggage – reason, common sense. Not that we would all agree necessarily but nature of the debate might be different. That's one idea.

Question: (*Consul General of Austria, Brigitta Blaha*) Is there nothing that can be changed within the structure of the UN to so that country policies are more important than individual personalities? Otherwise it seems that personality is what's most important in dealing with each other rather than country policies.

Ambassador Wolff: I think that in many of the issues we deal with, the UN missions – whether you call them led, in some cases, by personalities, other times it is the entrenched experts that are there – are usually not acting on direct instructions. On a number of issues they have a lot of latitude – sometimes there is the tyranny of the expert. We know a number of delegations where the political judgment isn't exercised as easily because the expert is here and controls the number and does not want oversight over it. The Fifth Committee deals with budget. The Fifth Committee is a subordinate body of the General Assembly. For whatever reason, you don't see ambassadors showing up in the Fifth Committee. You have Fifth Committee experts hashing it out. I go down to the Fifth Committee deliberately and we get a few other ambassadors to come and say as part of the General Assembly we are going to be making the same sort of judgment calls here. Then you get the Fifth Committee making a recommendation to the General Assembly, which then we will have to adopt it on behalf of the organization. There you get the

permanent representatives showing up because, well, this is General Assembly, we're above the Fifth Committee, but heaven help the General Assembly if it ever overturns anything of the Fifth Committee. So I think the dynamics here are deeply entrenched. They are, as I said exaggerated manifestations of issues we do experience bilaterally and multilaterally directly with countries but they really are exaggerated to an artificial degree here. That's why I think we need some sort of shake-up, whether it's revamping how we make decisions in the Fifth Committee. Should we have weighted voting? Should we realign? Should we prohibit bloc voting?

I'll give you another example, which applies across the board. I mentioned the G77 and the non-aligned deal is another good example, which is that the non-aligned deals with mainly political issues. It's an overlapping membership with the G77 (for the most part G77 deals with management and economic and development issues). There are 132 countries – most of them small missions. They don't have the wherewithal, the resources, to follow everything. So they rely on their colleagues to find out how they should act – vote – on any given issue. Secondly, the glue that binds the G77 and the non-aligned, in my opinion, is fear. Fear – not against those who are outside the group – but fear of those who are in the group. Every country has an immediate core issue or several of them that are really dear to them. It's usually a border dispute with a neighbor or a water dispute or some other problem that rarely, if ever, involves the United States. But since this group votes as a bloc, if you ever deviate from the consensus, your enemy inside the group can take advantage to bring the group around, ostracize you and then pounce on you about the issue you really care about. So everybody has to be a good citizen, everybody has to go with the group dynamic. And a number of times you talk to people in the group and they say, "It's an incredibly lame position we're defending, we know, but we've got to go along with it". It's another problem that I don't have a good answer for.

Question: Donna Constantinople, WFPG Board. I want you to address, what I think of as a real natural issue for leadership on the part of the UN and that's the global food crisis. It seems to me that what was leftover from the Kofi Annan days was a real question mark that hung over that because of the scandals involved. Now the world rivets on that. We're reading about it everyday. The U.S. population has always had a bias about foreign aid and how we help others. But this is a real crisis that we're seeing even on our front pages as I was flying up here today, that's on our streets now too. So could you kind of brief us about what you think the leadership that we now have in Ban Ki-Moon will do on this issue?

Ambassador Wolff: I'm glad you asked that question. That and water are the two issues that I think are increasingly going to have an effect on security. And if we don't tackle these issues collectively, effectively, and aggressively, those are going to be the wars of the future and we will be involved inevitably in trying to deal with those crises.

Ban Ki-Moon is seized with this. He is working actively to convene a number of meetings. He's talking to leaders. The problem is a complex one. It's a function of growing demand by increasingly affluent, middle income, large population countries. It's aggravated by fuel costs, it's aggravated by conflict, by zones of conflict, and it breeds

increasing conflict. So this is something – you're absolutely right – that is exactly the sort of issue the UN should be playing a leadership role on and I see it wanting to play a leadership role on. But, big letters, BUT this is one of those examples of where it will be member states who will be making the decisions. It won't be Ban Ki Moon making the decisions. He can convene the meeting, he can generate the interest, he can insure that there's high-level participation, he can use the bully pulpit but the decisions in terms of resources, in terms of policy, are decisions that are going to have to be taken by nation-states together. We see how difficult that is on issues like climate. It's the same sort of problem and when it involves resources, some are going to say that the oil-producing countries – who are experiencing huge windfalls and are contributing to incredibly expensive transportation costs, fuel, food-production costs – need to be doing more, need to be putting a fund up. Oil-producing countries are going to say, "Nice try". Others are going to say that countries that have subsidies need to increase subsidies to make sure there's more food on the market. Others are going to say that perhaps we should decrease subsidies so that we can make sure that the food prices go down if you're an importing country. So this is not an issue that I believe is prone to easy solutions and all of the problems that you see in trying to muster a consensus or even a significant majority in this organization when it comes to resources and who pays and where they go. This is going to be a brutal, brutal effort to try to get what everybody knows needs to be a policy to deal with the crisis. It's only going to get worse, and it's going to cost more for us all, and cost increasing numbers of lives, and ultimately force countries to deal with it by military force.

Ms. Sorensen: Ambassador, I wish we had another hour with you, but we are obliged to stick to our time and I know you are busy too. Thank you very much for your thoughtful comments and we wish you every success.