

**The Clinton Administration and the United Nations:
From “Assertive Multilateralism” to “Burden Sharing”**
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by

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The proposed paper examines the relationship between the Clinton administration and the United Nations. Clinton’s policy evolved from an idealist “assertive multilateral” position, in which the UN was a centerpiece of U.S. policy, to a more realist “burden sharing” stance, in which the UN was subsidiary to NATO and U.S. allies. The paper will feature current information culled from interviews with former Clinton administration officials, including Madeline Albright and Richard Holbrooke, and UN officials, such as Sashi Tharoor, formerly assistant to Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Clinton’s “assertive multilateralism” called for extensive uses of the UN in peacekeeping and enforcement. The principle was implemented with the conversion of Operation Restore Hope in Somalia into a U.S.-led UN peace enforcement mission (UNOSOM II) in March 1993. The October 1993 deaths of the eighteen U.S. Army Rangers in Somalia caused the Clinton administration to blame the UN and Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali. The 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict further soured relations between the Clinton administration and the UN, and the Dayton Accords shifter the peacekeeping burden to NATO. The UN and Boutros-Ghali incurred the blame for failed missions in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda and for the slow pace of UN reform. The caustic, public criticisms that Boutros-Ghali heaped on the United States turned the Clinton administration against him and led to a U.S. campaign to oust him after one term. In particular, the personal relationship between Boutros-Ghali and Madeleine Albright deteriorated. More important factors in the Clinton administration’s disenchantment with Boutros-Ghali and the UN were external factors, especially the 1994 Republican revolution, and President Clinton’s quest for reelection in 1996.

In 1996, the Clinton administration hand-picked Kofi Annan, a career UN staff member from Ghana, as Boutros-Ghali’s successor. With a background in two high-profile issues on the UN agenda, finance and peacekeeping, Annan seemed to be the ideal choice to manage the UN out of its difficulties. Annan stated that he would make the UN more effective and rebuild the UN-U.S. relationship. Although he started on good terms with the Clinton administration and began to cultivate cordial relations with Congress, Annan also remained critical of the Clinton administration and its “unilateralist” approach to the UN. Annan soon proved to be a more competent secretary-general than Boutros-Ghali and began to restore the UN’s credibility, especially in the eyes of the Clinton administration. Annan eventually prevailed in the struggle to persuade the United States to pay its dues. By 2000, the Clinton administration had fully reengaged with the UN, with an awareness of its limitations and capabilities.