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*A Strategy for Combating the
Global Ecological Crisis*

*Testimony before the U.S. Commission
on Improving the Effectiveness of
the United Nations*

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A STRATEGY FOR COMBATING THE GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

The world is facing a global ecological crisis. Forecasts of global climate change, the rapid loss of biodiversity and ecosystems, ozone depletion, desertification, and growing population are all indicators of impending crisis. Although there is uncertainty about the rate and implications of this crisis, the warning signs are clear. For the affluent northern world this may mean dislocations, adjustment, and unknown risks. For the developing southern world, it may be a question of long term survival.

To combat these threats, unprecedented global cooperation will be required. However achieving such cooperation seems like a distant dream. The poor nations of the world, which are growing fastest and have the least ability to adapt to global change, face questions of short term survival. They cannot be asked to make sacrifices to combat long term problems which carry uncertain consequences. In the north, the potential to adapt, and a perception of uncontrollable growth in the south, have combined to reduce interest in tackling the challenge.

In addition to the differences in risk and ability to respond, the agreements needed to combat these problems will be particularly difficult to negotiate and implement on a global scale. They will intersect every aspect of social and economic life and will require changes in domestic laws, life styles, and incentives. Verification of compliance will require new protocols, inspection procedures, and methods of implementing sanctions.

There is no clear direct route to achieving this type of global cooperation. It is simply beyond our skills to see how we can merge questions of equity, differing abilities to respond, differing risks, and technical complexity, into a global negotiation. We can only begin to develop the institutional and political tools that move us in the right direction.

Unfortunately our attempts to negotiate global treaties to combat global problems are not leading us on this path. Even if the U.S. had been more cooperative at Rio, the wide range of competing interests would have prevented a global climate change agreement with even limited sacrifice. We can also take little comfort from the more successful global efforts to fight ozone depletion. Unlike questions related to carbon use, or conservation of natural resources, the production of CFCs was limited to a few, mostly U.S.

firms. Substitution was possible and at a relatively limited and predictable cost. Perhaps the greatest lesson we can draw from the ozone experience was the importance of U.S. leadership in moving a diverse set of nations.

With that point in mind, better analogies can actually be found in our approaches to international security. The recently concluded chemical weapons convention is a treaty that intersects with the activities of major chemical producers around the world. Its provisions for domestic implementation and verification by UN inspectors is suggestive of the type of intricate protocols we will need. Secondly, if we are to look toward political institutions that have made sustained economic sacrifice, the best model is probably the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Although each individual nation debated the level of sacrifice it needed to make, NATO demonstrated that smaller groups of nations, bonded by similar cultural and economic traditions, and led by the United States, can work together against large, but uncertain common threats.

I therefore propose that the first serious assault on global ecological problems can only be made by a smaller set of affluent western and Pacific rim nations. Nations that have common economic interests, are not facing immediate questions of survival, and have the potential to work together to develop new traditions in international diplomacy. A tradition that moves us toward the development, negotiation, implementation, and verification of the type of agreements needed to combat global environmental problems.

There are two obvious questions regarding this strategy: 1) With their better ability to adapt to global changes, do affluent nations have an interest in taking this leadership role?, and 2) would such a strategy divert us from the global nature of this challenge? To the first question I say that although we may have a better ability to adapt, we also share incalculable, but significant risks. Adjustment to ecological changes will be expensive in both human and economic terms and the risk of cataclysm is not zero. Nor can we simply stand by and witness an immense human tragedy in the southern world and expect that it would not affect our political or moral foundations.

To the second question I have already argued that there is very little promise in truly global negotiations. We should also keep in mind that although there are projections for tremendous growth in the underdeveloped world, it is still the developed world that is the major consumer of resources. Projections have had a rather dismal history. We should also note that

technology systems and business practices flow from north to south. Our emphasis on sustainable development for ourselves will enhance the diffusion of such practices to the developing world. From the perspective of efficacy and efficiency, a northern strategy is the only initial alternative.

It should be the role of the United Nations, or other broadly based international organizations, to monitor the protocols of this smaller affluent group, perform verification, and ultimately bring other nations into the process. Let me point out that the first extension of this limited partnership is likely to be toward the former Soviet Union, where there is no correlation between resource use and prosperity. It is where investment in efficiency and conservation is likely to improve both economic conditions and be one of the most cost effective ways of attacking global ecological problems.

In summary it is the role of the affluent nations to lead. It could be the role of the United Nations to focus that leadership in ways that avoid a North-South divide and help insure that such a strategy becomes a testament of good faith, rather than an element of environmental imperialism.

