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America Must Safeguard Its Essential Interests At UNESCO

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In the wake of the poison gas attacks on innocent civilians in the suburbs of Damascus, President Obama declared that our ideals and our national security were at stake, along with our leadership, which seeks to ensure that such weapons will never be used again. As a survivor of Auschwitz and Dachau, liberated by American G.I.’s after my family perished in the Nazi gas chambers, I was deeply moved by his words. The entire world was horrified by the evidence of Bashar Al-Assad's carnage, and the grave consequences of inaction in the face of such outrage are not difficult to discern.

Eliminating Syria's chemical stockpiles, containing Iran's nuclear ambitions and curbing North Korea's ballistic aspirations, particularly if achieved through peaceful diplomacy, would be milestone achievements in 21st century international relations. But Obama's noble goals require more than military might and diplomatic prowess. We must also deploy our much vaunted, but seldom used, soft power. In the long run, the only way to dismantle arsenals of mass destruction and prevent genocidal wars is to pacify implacable hereditary enemies through education, communication, cooperation and other forms of civilized human intercourse.

This was the mandate the international community gave the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, born in the ashes of World War II. Today more than ever, such institutions, which serve mankind as a whole, cannot be expected to perform their lofty work without our moral and material support. All the more so because America, still perceived by many as the indispensable nation, cannot be on all fronts, military or civilian.

In the last few years, UNESCO's first woman director-general, Irina Bokova, has courageously embarked, with limited means, on plans to make that institution more efficient and focused on challenges and regions where it is most needed. Her determination and energy have catalyzed vigorous promotion of universal values and interests. Under her leadership the organization has scored important victories in the global war on illiteracy. It has also launched an audacious campaign to guarantee education rights for millions of impoverished children.
Bokova's push to empower women is breaking down antiquated taboos about their place in society, permitting them to play a more active role in building strong and more sustainable communities in Latin America, Asia and Africa. She has prioritized the expansion of pedagogic infrastructures, teacher training and school curricula. She has proven to be a tireless defender of freedom of information and protector of journalists all over the world. Together with her dedicated, planetary teams she is also struggling to safeguard what is left of humanity's ancient cultural patrimony in a newly inflamed universe where historic places of worship, museums and monuments are torched and dynamited daily.

UNESCO's Holocaust and genocide education program - part of its mission to promote peace and human rights -- has broadened the reach of its efforts to mitigate anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim bigotry and other types of racial and religious prejudice. One outstanding example of this is support for "Project Aladdin" and its pioneering work in the Middle East. In 2011, it assembled some 200 political and spiritual leaders, among them heads of state, cardinals, grand muftis and chief rabbis, in Auschwitz-Birkenau -- the epicenter of the greatest catastrophe ever perpetrated by man against man. Invited to address this unlikely gathering in the name of the victims and the survivors, I saw and heard them - with renewed hope -- transcend racial, religious and political strife, and pray in unison to their common God.

In the midst of these significant accomplishments, all of strategic importance to America as to other continents, UNESCO suddenly finds itself, for totally extraneous reasons, in the throes of a financial crisis that threatens its very existence. This crisis exploded two years ago, when the Palestinian Authority decided to ignore the United Nations Charter, which requires a recommendation from the Security Council before the General Assembly can admit a new member, and persuaded a block of sympathizing countries to vote in Palestine as a member state of UNESCO. As required by law, the U.S. could not but freeze its annual 80 million dollar contributions to that agency, depriving it of almost a quarter of its annual budget.

The United States, a founding and influential member of UNESCO's Executive Board, is now in danger of losing its right to vote at the upcoming session of the General Conference. Next month's meeting of the organization's 195 member states will decide how to apportion future budgets and institute other draconian economies. In America's absence from the table, countries like China, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have stepped in to fill some of the expenditure gaps on the basis of agendas that do not necessarily coincide with those of the U.S. or its closest allies. All this demonstrates why Washington should release the accumulated funds it owes, so UNESCO can continue to function, and the U.S. can resume its full role in policy and decision-making.

Promoting literacy in the world, teaching tolerance, empowering women, defending freedom of expression and helping build democratic societies where ignorance, obscurantism and extremism pose grave international dangers are essential to preserving universal as well as American values and interests. But given the delicate situation in which UNESCO currently finds itself, and which is not of its own making, no one, not even the admirable and resourceful Irina Bokova, can predict its future. Abandoning or losing this unique United Nations organization to obscure political, ideological or fundamentalist influences cannot be an option. If education, science and culture are to thrive, if genocides, ethnic cleanings and other mass atrocities are to vanish permanently from this earth, UNESCO's crucial mission must go on, indeed, prosper.
It is high time that the U.S. Congress work with the Obama administration toward a solution that will give the Executive authority to waive the restrictions on America's financial contributions to UNESCO. Doing so is clearly in our national interest.

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