

## **Assessing the Obama Administration's Role in the Field of Multilateral Diplomacy and Nuclear Disarmament**

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On October 9, 2009, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that it had awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2009 to President Barack Obama “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.” The Committee “attached special importance to Obama's vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons.”

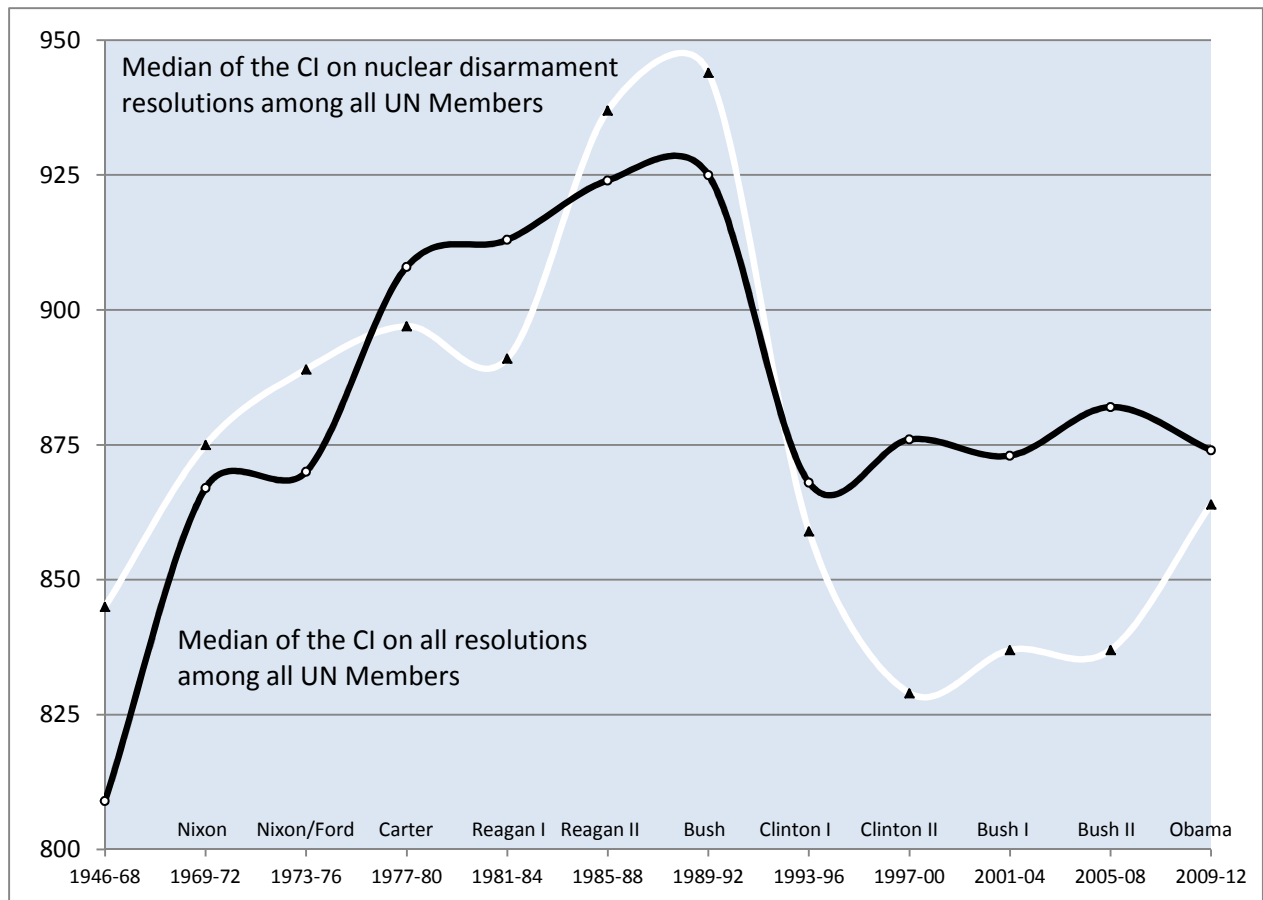
The Committee added that President Obama has “created a new climate in international politics. Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play.”

One way to assess the results of President Obama's efforts in multilateral diplomacy and nuclear disarmament is to study the votes cast by the United States in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and compare them to those of his predecessors. To put those votes into context, it might be useful to begin with a description of the evolution of the voting pattern in the UNGA.

The data for this study is taken from the votes cast by UN Member States on the 4,437 General Assembly resolutions adopted by a recorded vote since 1946 (and through December 2012). The analytical tools —the Coincidence Index and its median— are described in the methodological note at the end of this text. The Assembly's sessions have been grouped as follows: 1946 to 1968 and then by U.S. presidential administrations.

The degree of agreement within the UNGA increased steadily until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and then began to drop. Graph 1 shows that evolution in terms of the United States' presidential administrations since 1969. It also includes the extent of coincidence among all UN Members on those resolutions regarding nuclear disarmament issues.

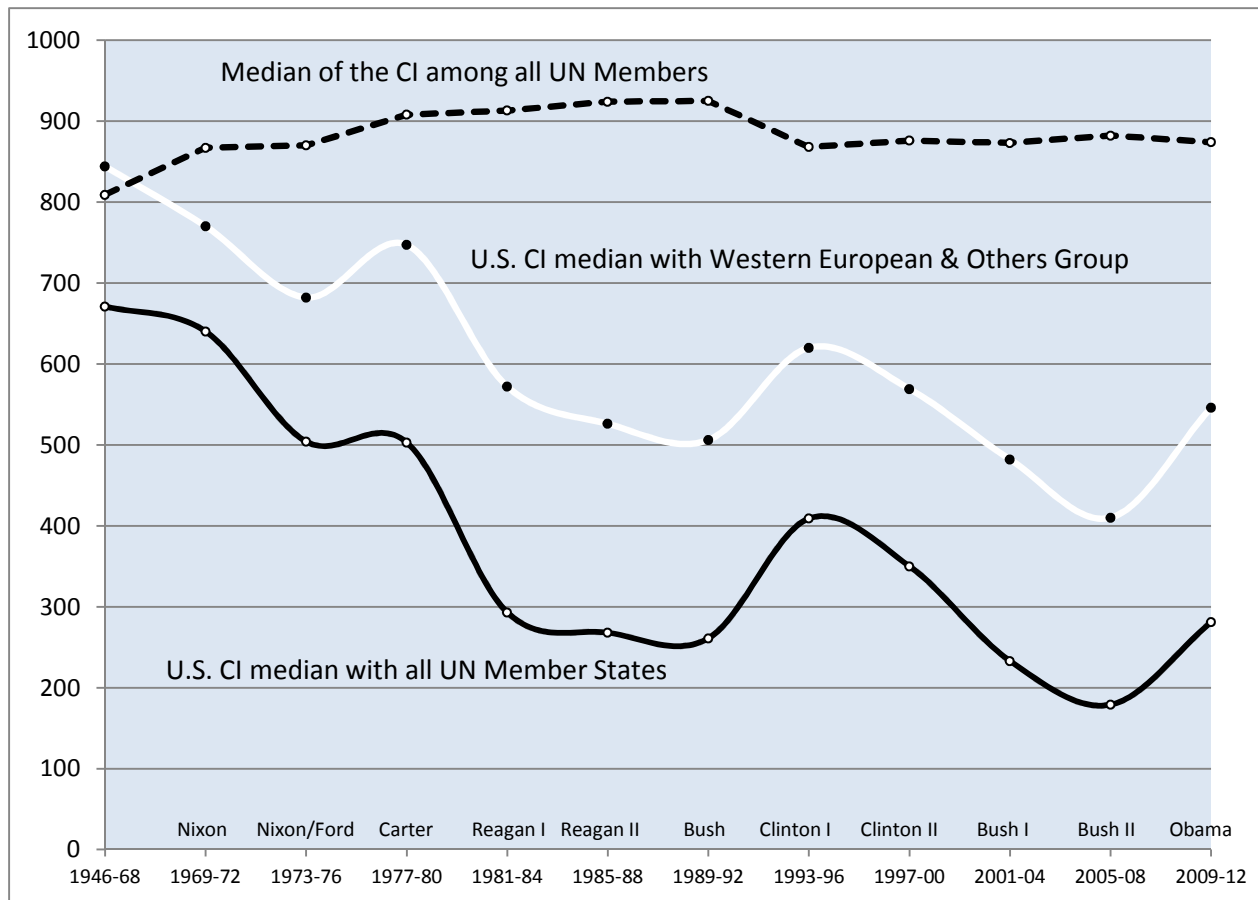
Graph 1  
Median of the Coincidence Index Among All UN Members on  
UN General Assembly Resolutions Adopted by a Recorded Vote



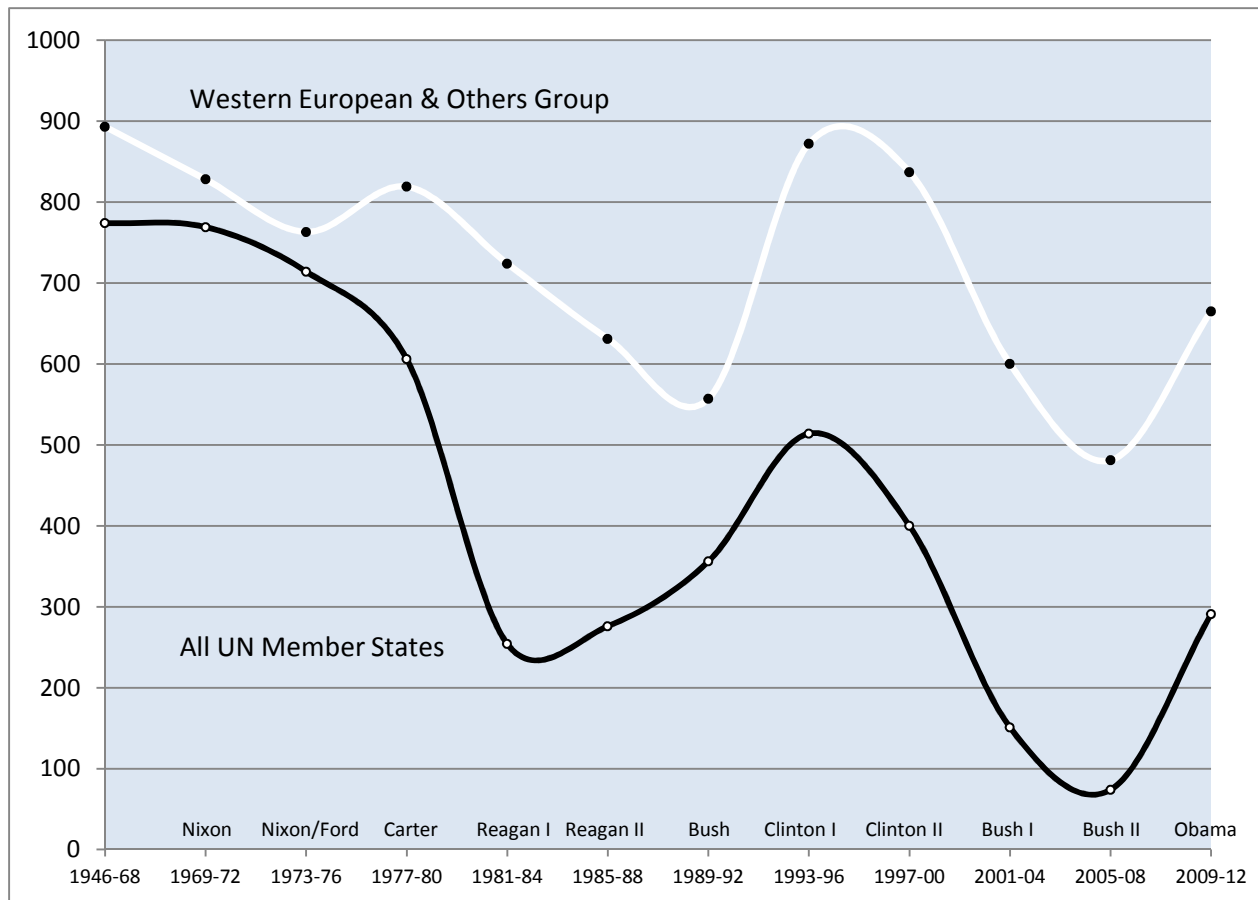
The following two graphs offer a picture of the United States' attitude towards the United Nations. They focus on what has occurred in the UNGA, the international community's most representative forum. The graphs compare the votes cast by the United States to those of other countries on resolutions regarding all agenda items as well as resolutions relating to nuclear disarmament issues. For comparative purposes the median of the United States' Coincidence Index with the members of its regional group (Western European and Others) is also given. The degree of agreement is measured between 0 and 1000. From 1946 to 1968 period, for example, the United States' Coincidence Index with all UN Members on all issues was 671 (or 67.1%). On nuclear disarmament questions it was 77.4%. By 2005-2008 it had fallen to its lowest level, 17.9 and 6.1%, respectively.

Whereas the median of the Coincidence Index among all UN Members on all UNGA resolutions has remained rather constant, the graphs show a growing disagreement between the United States and other UN Members on multilateral issues. This was especially apparent during the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. The trend was temporarily reversed during Jimmy Carter's term in office and Bill Clinton's first administration and again with the first Obama administration. The same trend may be observed with regard to the nuclear disarmament items of the UNGA's agenda.

Graph 2  
Median of the Coincidence Index of the United States on all  
UN General Assembly Resolutions Adopted by a Recorded Vote



Graph 3  
Median of the Coincidence Index of the United States on UN General Assembly Resolutions  
Adopted by a Recorded Vote Regarding Nuclear Disarmament Items



It is obvious that an incoming Democratic administration has reversed the trend established by its Republican predecessor. What has occurred during the first Obama administration is thus not unusual. Let us take a closer look at the agenda items that registered a change in the United States' votes during the first year of a Democratic administration: 1977, 1993 and 2009. Table 1 lists the votes cast by the United States during those UNGA sessions.

Table 1  
United States Votes on United Nations General Assembly Resolutions

	1976	1977	1992	1993	2008	2009
Total resolutions	261	271	306	333	321	306
Total adopted by a vote	98	106	75	65	76	69
Recorded votes	90	95	75	65	76	69
United States vote						
Yes	21	38	16	14	8	13
No	28	20	44	35	61	45
Abstention	39	36	14	15	7	11
Absent	2	1	1	1	0	0

In all three cases (Ford/Carter, Bush/Clinton, and Bush/Obama) the negative votes cast by the United States decreased with the arrival of a Democratic administration. Carter and Obama also increased the affirmative votes and Carter abstained fewer times (Table 2).

Table 2  
Changes (per cent) in United States Votes on United Nations General Assembly Resolutions

	Total resolutions	Total by vote	Recorded	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
1976	261	98	90				2
1977	271	106	95	+81%	-29%	-7.7%	1
1992	306	75	75				1
1993	333	65	65	-12.5%	-20.5%	+7.1%	1
2008	321	76	76				
2009	306	69	69	+62.5%	-26.2%	+57.1	

Changes in the votes cast by an incoming Democratic administration in 1977, 1993 and 2009 are reflected in the median of the United States' Coincidence Index with UN Members. Table 3 details those trends for all UN Members, the Western European and Others group and Israel. In the case of President Bill Clinton the reversal was modest (+9%), with President Jimmy Carter it was high and with President Obama it was very high (over 40%). That was due in large measure to the fact that during the last year of President George W. Bush the position of the United States in the UNGA reached its lowest point since 1946.

Table 3  
Median of United States Coincidence Index with Members of the United Nations

	1976	1977	1992	1993	2008	2009
Median IC of all UN members	888	916	893	875	887	877
Change		+3%		-2%		-1%
United States CI with all UN Members	471	597	318	347	181	265
Change		+27%		+9%		+46%
United States CI with WEO Group	661	784	554	602	403	565
Change		+19%		+9%		+40%
United States CI with Israel	776	815	784	786	805	941
Change		+5%		Same		+17%
United States CI with the United Kingdom	841	899	676	703	520	659
Change		+7%		+4%		+27%

Let us now examine in greater detail the changes that appeared at the UNGA during President Obama's first administration and compare it to the second administration of President George W. Bush (2005-2008).

The UNGA agenda has evolved over time. This is reflected in the subjects of resolutions adopted by a recorded vote. Items that once accounted for many of those resolutions have disappeared from the agenda. Such was the case of resolutions dealing with the situation in Southern Africa in general and South Africa's policy of *apartheid* in particular. Other agenda items that were once routinely voted on (such as economic issues and the UN's budget) are now the subjects of resolutions adopted without a vote.

Since the mid-1990s the subjects of UNGA resolutions adopted by a recorded vote are distributed as follows:

Middle East/Palestine	29.6%
Social (including human rights)	19.3
Nuclear disarmament	16.7
International security and non-nuclear disarmament	15.3
Decolonization	8.7
Political	5.0
Codification of International Law	2.0
United Nations Budget	1.9
Economic	1.5
Southern Africa	0

Resolutions on the Middle East/Palestine, social questions, nuclear disarmament and international security and non-nuclear disarmament issues accounted for 81% of those that were adopted by a recorded vote since 1994.

During the UNGA's four regular sessions during the second Bush administration (2005-2008) the UN General Assembly adopted 322 resolutions by a recorded vote. About 27% of those resolutions dealt with issues regarding the Middle East and Palestine, 23% with social questions, including human rights, 19% with international security and non-nuclear disarmament, and 17% with nuclear disarmament. They accounted for 85% of all resolutions put to a vote.

In the 2009-2012 period, those resolutions accounted for 82% of the 280 resolutions adopted by a vote: 31, 20, 12 and 20%, respectively.

Table 4 summarizes the resolutions by subject.

Table 4  
Resolutions adopted by the UNGA by Subject in 2005-2008 and 2009-2012

	Bush 2005-2008	Obama 2009-2012
Total resolutions	1220	1186
Total resolutions by a vote*	322	280
UN Budget	9	5
Political	12	17
International security and non-nuclear disarmament	60	33
Nuclear Disarmament	54	55
Economic	7	9
Social	74	56
Codification of International Law	4	9
Decolonization	26	26
Middle East/Palestine	86	86
Southern Africa	0	0

\* Sum is larger than total because some resolutions were included under more than one heading.



Table 5 provides a comparison of the median of the United States' Coincidence Index in 2005-2008 and 2009-2012 with all UN members, the Western European and Others Group, Israel and the United Kingdom. It covers all resolutions adopted by a recorded vote, as well as those relating to political questions, international security and non-nuclear disarmament, nuclear disarmament, social issues (including human rights), and the Middle East/Palestine. Subjects of agenda items with less than ten resolutions are omitted.

The data in Table 5 then appears in Figures 1 through 6.

Table 5  
Median of United States Coincidence Index with Members  
of the United Nations in 2005-2008 and 2009-2012

	2005-08	2009-12	% change
<b>All resolutions</b>			
Median IC of all UN members	882	874	-1%
United States CI with all UN Members	179	281	+57%
United States CI with WEO Group	410	546	+33%
United States CI with Israel	804	923	+15%
United States CI with the United Kingdom	506	666	+32%
<b>Political</b>			
Median IC of all UN members	909	846	-7%
United States CI with all UN Members	100	410	+310%
United States CI with WEO Group	333	647	+94%
United States CI with Israel	833	906	+9%
United States CI with the United Kingdom	333	676	+103%
<b>International security and non-nuclear disarmament</b>			
Median IC of all UN members	937	924	-1%
United States CI with all UN Members	258	606	+135%
United States CI with WEO Group	367	697	+90%
United States CI with Israel	621	955	+54%
United States CI with the United Kingdom	467	823	+76%
<b>Nuclear disarmament</b>			
Median IC of all UN members	837	864	+3%
United States CI with all UN Members	074	291	+292%
United States CI with WEO Group	481	665	+38%
United States CI with Israel	741	861	+16%

United States CI with the United Kingdom	698	894	+28%
Social questions including human rights			
Median IC of all UN members	846	817	-3%
United States CI with all UN Members	219	282	+29%
United States CI with WEO Group	628	804	+28%
United States CI with Israel	794	882	+11%
United States CI with the United Kingdom	642	866	+35%
Decolonization			
Median IC of all UN members	955	962	+1%
United States CI with all UN Members	220	154	-30%
United States CI with WEO Group	400	385	-4%
United States CI with Israel	937	1000	+7%
United States CI with the United Kingdom	820	923	+13%
Middle East/Palestine			
Median IC of all UN members	919	923	+0.5%
United States CI with all UN Members	090	096	+7%
United States CI with WEO Group	180	182	+0.1%
United States CI with Israel	942	953	+1%
United States CI with the United Kingdom	180	182	+0.1%

Figure 1

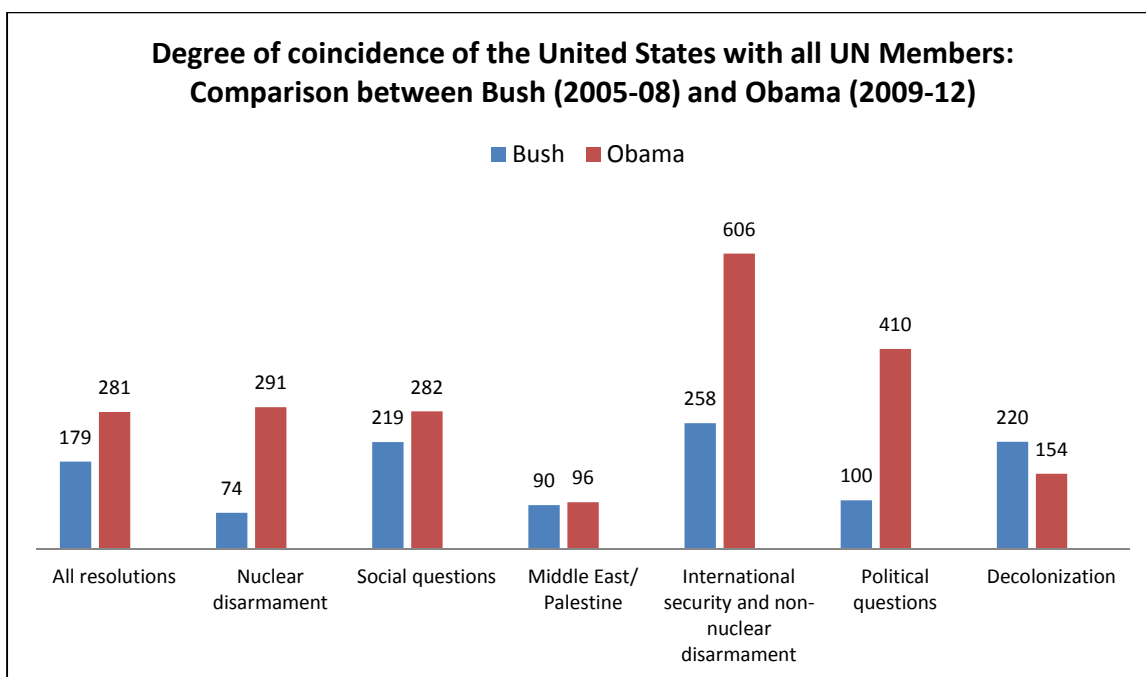


Figure 2

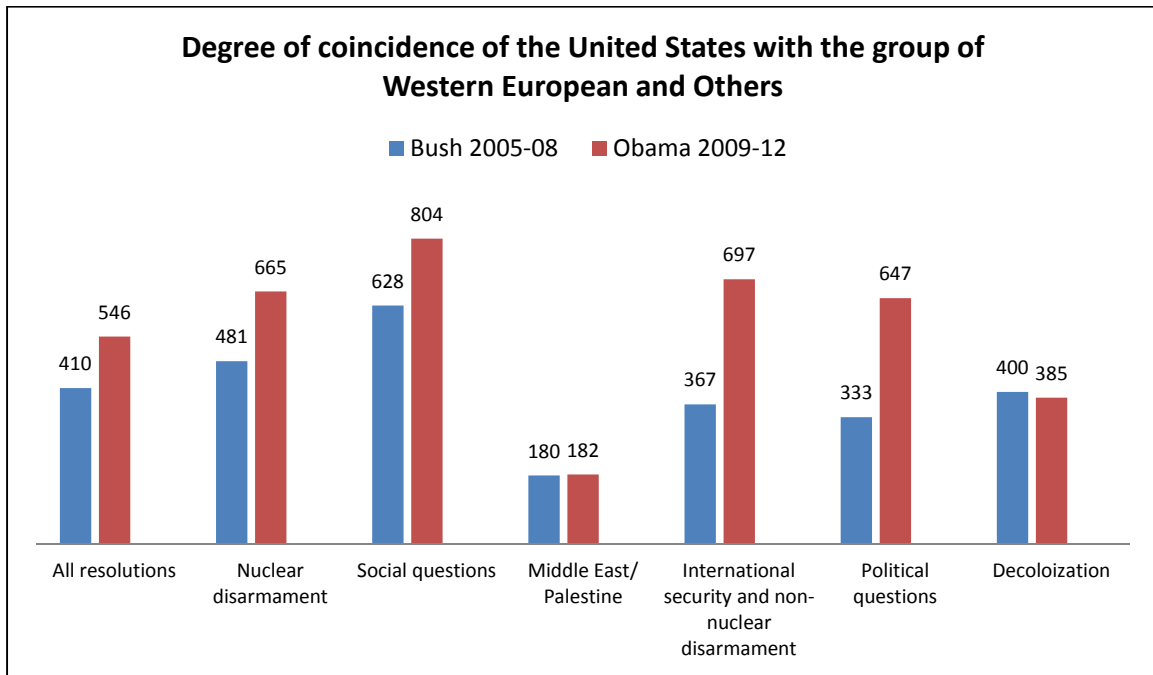


Figure 3

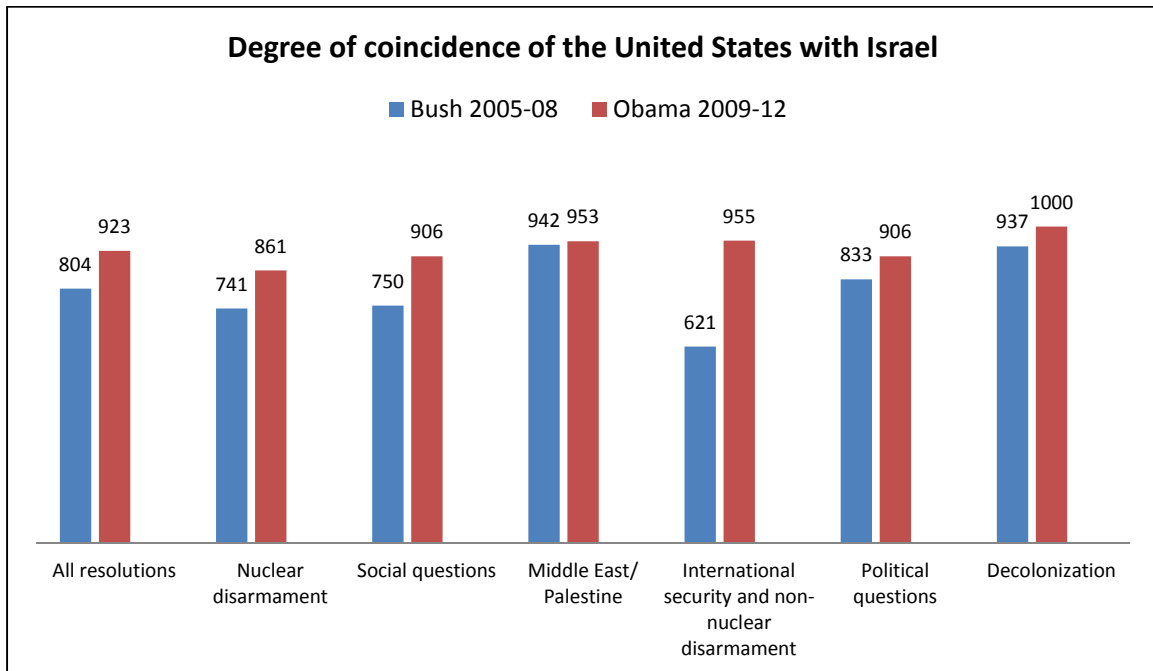


Figure 4

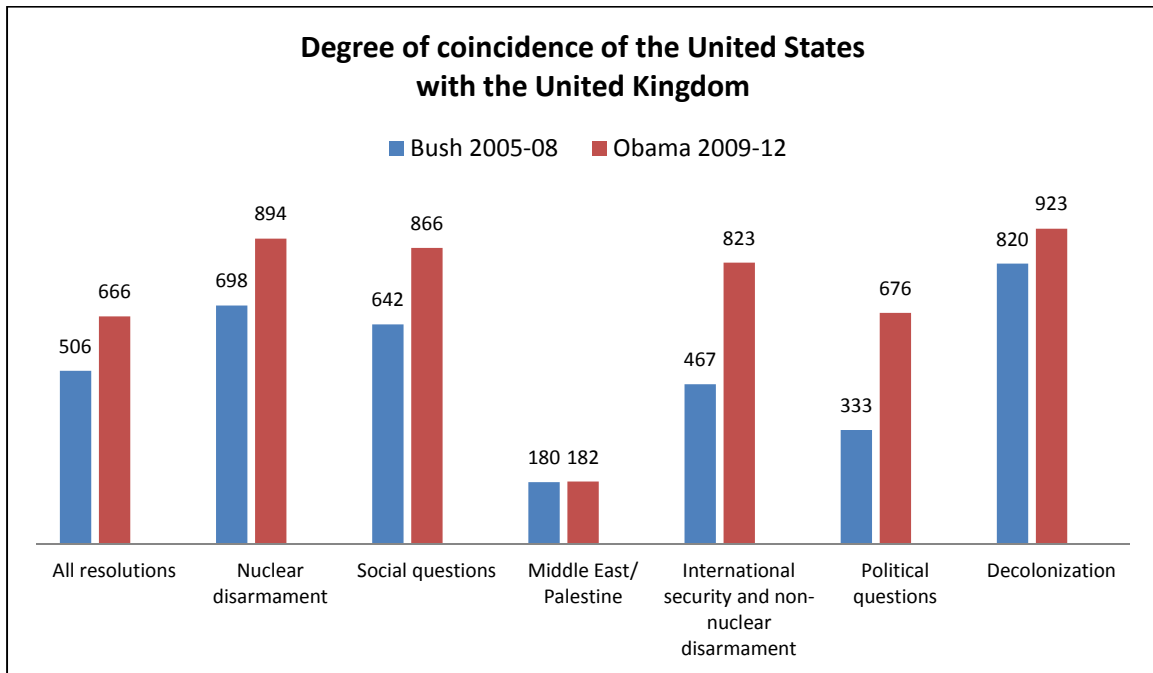


Figure 5

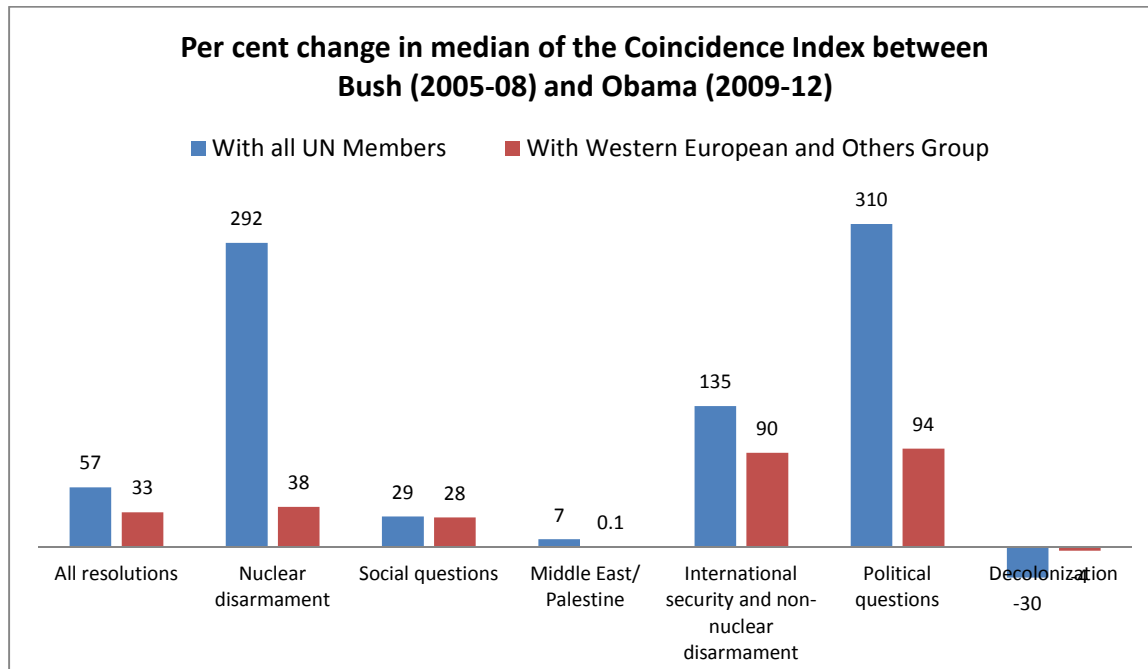
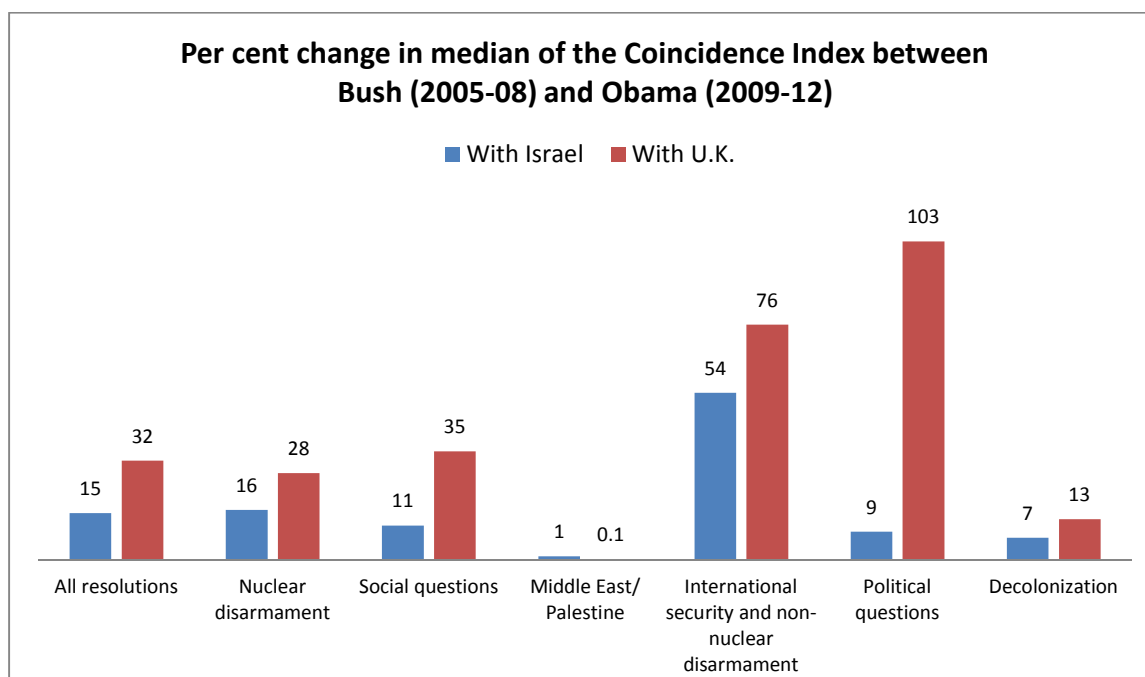


Figure 6



It is obvious that the voting pattern of the United States in the UNGA during the first Obama administration reversed the trend established by President George W. Bush. Its most dramatic expression was the change registered on issues regarding political questions and nuclear disarmament. Significantly, President Obama moved closer to Israel on Middle East/Palestine resolutions and thus distanced itself from the rest of the UN Members, including those in the Western European and Others Group.

Which are the UNGA agenda items regarding nuclear disarmament that gave rise to the dramatic change in the United States' position on those items during the Obama administration? Simply stated, during the second George W. Bush administration the United States emitted the following votes on the 54 resolutions on nuclear disarmament issues: three in favor, 50 against and one abstention; during Obama's administration the votes cast on those issues were: 12 in favor, 36 against and 7 abstentions.

A closer look at those items, however, reveals that the change was based on very few issues. First, President Obama reversed the position regarding the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) by voting in favor on four occasions of the resolution on that item whereas President Bush had voted against it four times. Second, the same pattern was repeated regarding the item "Renewed determination towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons" (and its successor

item after 2010 “United action towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons”). And third, on the UNGA agenda item “Conclusion of effective international arrangements to assure non-nuclear-weapon States against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons,” Obama abstained four times whereas Bush had voted against the same resolution.

The Obama administration also abstained on the resolution regarding the “Treaty on the South-East Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (Bangkok Treaty)” and voted in favor the three times it appeared on the agenda of the resolution on a “Treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.” These had not appeared on the agenda during the Bush administration.

However, on many other nuclear disarmament issues before the UNGA, the Obama administration followed in the footsteps of its predecessors. It continued the United States’ opposition to resolutions calling for specific nuclear disarmament measures:

- Convention on the prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons
- Decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems
- Effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium
- Follow-up to nuclear disarmament obligations agreed to at the Review Conferences of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
- Follow-up to the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on *The Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*;
- Nuclear disarmament;
- Reducing nuclear danger:
- Towards a nuclear-weapon-free world: accelerating the implementation of nuclear disarmament commitments;
- The risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East;
- Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia;
- Nuclear-weapon-free Southern Hemisphere and adjacent areas.

The votes cast by the United States on UNGA resolutions during President Obama’s first term in office signal a welcome change of attitude towards multilateral diplomacy and international organizations. Positions regarding nuclear disarmament, however, remain mostly unchanged.

### Methodological Note

Since 1946 (and through December 2012) the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has held 67 regular, 28 special and 10 emergency special sessions. As a result of those sessions, the UNGA has adopted 16,114 resolutions: 10,025 were adopted without a vote and 6,089 by a vote. However, only 4,437 of those votes were recorded. The recorded votes of UN Member States were included in a data bank which served to compare them with those of others.

UNGA resolutions are a concrete expression of world opinion on a wide variety of multilateral issues. The analysis of the votes cast by States on those issues is one way of taking the pulse of the international situation at a given moment. A comparison of those votes can lead to a better understanding of the UN and of the attitude of individual countries towards the Organization. Therein lies the value of studying General Assembly voting patterns. However, it is difficult to devise a method to measure objectively the degree to which countries agree or disagree at the UN.

Voting patterns at the UN General Assembly have long been analyzed. Votes have been compared and the question asked is: who votes with whom on a given issue? Statistics are compiled and conclusions drawn. Some analysts have approached the subject of voting at the UN as an academic exercise; others have more specific objectives in mind and certain governments have gone so far as to link votes to the level of their foreign aid to other countries. Some governments have identified the ten or so resolutions which most interest them and have then compared their own votes to those of others. But this tends to be a highly subjective exercise. A few non-governmental organizations have approached the problem with more objectivity. After identifying the most important resolutions adopted at a session, they analyze each nation's vote according to a set of predetermined criteria, such as the World Federalists' "World Order Values".

It would, of course, be most useful to have a set of agreed criteria with which to analyze and evaluate each country's votes. One could think in terms of the UN Charter's purposes and principles. But even here there is the risk of some degree of subjectivity, since on any issue there can be conflicting interpretations of the Charter's provisions. The fact is that year after year UN Members are called upon to define their position by voting on a variety of resolutions. And deciding how to vote is not always easy. Voting is the culmination of the Assembly's debates.

That is to be expected in a body whose decision-making process is based on democratic principles.

It is true that the General Assembly has adopted well over half of its resolutions without a vote. But resolutions on the most controversial issues are almost always put to a vote, and it is precisely those resolutions that allow us to study and compare the attitude of Member States towards certain crucial problems of international relations.

When a resolution is put to a vote, delegations may vote “Yes”, “No” or “Abstention”. They may also opt “to absent themselves” from the room. Finally, they may decide to remain in the room but announce that they are “not participating” in the vote.

Let us examine the General Assembly voting records of UN Members and attempt to measure the extent of agreement among them. To do so, we shall rely on three analytical tools: the Coincidence Index devised for this study, the grouping of resolutions according to issues, and the median.

How often did country A vote the same as country B? When they voted differently, was it a case of “Yes/No” or did it involve abstentions? How does one take into account absences (genuine or self-imposed) or “announced non-participation” (which is really an absence)? The Coincidence Index (CI) is designed to answer those questions. If country A always votes “Yes” while country B always votes “No”, their CI is zero; if they always vote the same, their CI is 1000. Between these two extremes one can find all UN Members.

To determine the CI, begin by eliminating those votes in which one (or both) of the countries being compared was absent. Then add all those times in which they voted the same: Yes/Yes, No/No or Abstention/Abstention. To each of those “coinciding” or identical votes assign a value of two; and, in order to differentiate between a Yes/No, on the one hand, and a Yes/Abstention or a No/Abstention, on the other, assign to the latter a value of one. The formula is quite simple:

$$CI = \frac{2 (\text{total identical votes}) + (\text{total Abstention/Yes} + \text{Abstention/No})}{2 (\text{total resolutions both voted})}$$

The CI is only a tool for comparing the votes of any two given States. It does not pretend to judge the content of the resolution being voted. That would be an exercise fraught with danger. It simply takes into account how often the votes were identical (Yes/Yes, No/No and Abs/Abs), different (Abstention/Yes or Abstention/No) or opposing (Yes/No).



The CI appears to produce less distortion than other methods. For example, in its annual “Report to Congress on Voting Practices in the United Nations”, the US State Department seeks to ascertain the “percent coincidence of a country’s votes with the United States, calculated on the basis of Yes/No votes only and does not take into account abstentions or absences”. This approach can skew the results since it tends to exaggerate the extremes: it magnifies the extent of agreement or disagreement and thus appears greater or smaller than the CI (Table). Abstentions do matter and should be included in the calculations.

<p style="text-align: center;">Table Coincidence of US Votes with the UK and the USSR (Russia): A Comparison of the Results Using Two Different Methods</p>							
	<i>1950</i>	<i>1960</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2010</i>
United States/United Kingdom							
US State Department	813	1000	1000	962	818	644	800
Coincidence Index	750	855	932	862	738	632	667
United States/USSR (Russia)							
US State Department	313	579	182	164	167	302	300
Coincidence Index	342	597	333	324	262	403	312

A computer program was written following the CI method and a data base was created from the 4,437 recorded votes since 1946 on Assembly resolutions, indicating the votes cast by every UN Member State (yes, no, abstention or absent). A file was opened for each country that has participated in those votes and, by the end of 2012, the data bank contained 874,089 entries. The computer did the rest.

The mountain of the compiled data had to be distilled and its presentation had to be condensed. In order to focus the analysis and trace the evolution of the voting patterns, the study was divided over time and by subject. It was relatively easy to identify the most important items debated in the Assembly in order to examine how the CI varied from one issue to another. They have been grouped under the following ten headings:

1. United Nations budget
2. Political
3. International security and non-nuclear disarmament
4. Nuclear disarmament
5. Economic
6. Social
7. Codification of International Law
8. Decolonization
9. Middle East/Palestine
10. Southern Africa

The General Assembly's agenda has changed over the years. During four decades the number of agenda items grew almost constantly, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s. Then it declined and has been more or less stable since the early 1990s. These changes are reflected in the resolutions adopted by a recorded vote. Those resolutions allow us to study the evolving interests of UN Member States on a variety of subjects that continue to divide the General Assembly. The basic tool employed in this study is the median, or the point at which UN Member States are divided into two equal parts.