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Stand Down! UN ‘takeover of the Internet’ postponed indefinitely

By [David Post](#)

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At its quadrennial “Plenipotentiary” meeting, the UN’s International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has apparently rejected a variety of proposals that would have injected the ITU (and the notion of sovereign state control) more centrally into the design and operation of the technical protocols that make up a critical part of the Internet’s fundamental infrastructure. [\[An excellent brief summary of the proceedings, along with links to the relevant documents, can be found here\]](#)

It might just be an important moment in Internet history – though we probably can’t really know about that for sure for some time. While it’s never been strictly correct to talk about any sort of “UN takeover” of the Internet - even if it wanted to, it’s by no means clear how such a takeover could be executed — there has certainly been significant movement in the last few years by those asserting a much greater role for the ITU in Internet governance/management. The prospect has never been a pleasing one – see some of my earlier blog postings on the question [here](#) and [here](#), as well as the collection of essays housed at [the Register](#). The ITU has played virtually no role in the Internet’s evolution over the years; indeed, the ITU helped develop and promote a *competing* set of inter-networking protocols (known as the “OSI” protocols) back in the 1980s which, notwithstanding the backing and support of many of the ITU’s member States (including, oddly enough, the U.S., which for many years in the late 1980s/early 1990s actually mandated use of OSI, in preference to the TCP/IP protocols which define the Internet as we know it today, on most government networked computer systems), went pretty much nowhere. To many observers (including me) that is not a coincidence, for there is a connection between the ITU’s lack of involvement and the Internet’s astonishing success. It is hard (read: impossible) to imagine a UN-style body, controlled by majority vote among the governments of the world – many of which continue, in 2014, to adhere to a “state monopoly telephone network” model when thinking about telecommunications questions, and many of which are deeply troubled (as they should be) by the openness and decentralized nature of the Internet’s architecture – designing a network that is as flexible and simple and easy to access as the Internet we have. And to put it mildly, some of the more specific proposals that had been floated in previous ITU meetings – from [Russia](#), from [the Arab States](#), among others — were not reassuring on this score.

So if this actually represents an abandonment of the position that the ITU, as a representative of the sovereign governments of the world, is the most appropriate institution for Internet protocol development and policy-making – and, though UN-speak is not my native language, which

makes for some hard slogging through the documents, it appears that it is, at least for the time being – it's a big day.

David Post taught intellectual property and Internet law at Georgetown Law Center and Temple University Law School until his recent retirement. He is the author of "In Search of Jeffersons Moose: Notes on the State of Cyberspace" (Oxford, 2009), a Fellow at the Center for Democracy and Technology, and an Adjunct Scholar at the Cato Institute.