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Irrelevant or indispensable? – The United Nations after the Iraq War

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Irrelevant or Indispensable? – The United Nations after the Iraq War

“Not the sincere efforts of leaders and citizens to substitute international institutions and international diplomacy for military power; not the terrible cost of two world wars; not those of countless smaller internal and international wars throughout the world since 1945; not even the potential consequences of war fought with nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, as well as the massively increased potential lethality of conventional technology, have fundamentally changed the fact that the threat and use of force are the ultimate instruments of international relations. [...] In the end, all decisions on use of military force are unilateral.” - Walter B. Slocombe

The decision of the United States to form a “coalition of the willing” and to attack Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq in March 2003 without an explicit UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution authorizing the use of force was widely seen as the harbinger of a new era where the UN – and notably the UNSC – has lost its “primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security”. Iraq, so the argument goes, was just the first phase of a far more ambitious new U.S. Grand Strategy – based on the tenets of preventive and pre-emptive military strikes – to fundamentally reshape the world and cement America’s superpower status for decades to come. Many UN member states viewed the US-led war against Iraq as “an unwarranted, illegal, and unjustified assault on the sovereignty of an independent nation”. The UN in particular, as the custodian of the two founding principles of today’s international order – the principle of sovereign equality and the rule of non-intervention in the affairs of other states – has been considered by many as the first casualty of Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, the rumors of the UN’s imminent demise in the wake of the Iraq war are greatly exaggerated for several reasons:

- First, the U.S. intervention in Iraq took place under rather unique circumstances, notably Saddam Hussein’s failure to comply with long-standing UNSC resolutions requiring him to abandon all WMD programs and ballistic missile systems. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, in an interview with Abu Dhabi television on March 26, 2003, stressed that the war was being “conducted under the authority of UN Resolution 1441 and earlier Resolutions 678 and 687”. This clearly demonstrates the importance that both the United States and the United Kingdom attach to the international legitimacy conferred by acting in the name of the UN and its Security Council.
- Second, the new U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) released in September 2002 – source of much hyped international concern – is not a radical blueprint for the widespread, unilateral use of preventive and pre-emptive U.S. military strikes. The NSS makes ample reference to the United States’ “lasting commitment to the UN, the WTO, the OAS, and NATO”; it also favors foreign aid and supports the fight against HIV/AIDS. Rather, the NSS underlines that the United States – confronted with new, incalculable catastrophic threats posed by “rogue states and their terrorist clients” or “terrorist organizations with global reach” – believes that it can, in fundamental ways, re-shape its security environment to address these threats. What makes the NSS unique is the fact that the United States is arguably the only country in the world today that has both the ambition and the capacity to remove these threats. Other countries and entities, in contrast, hope at best to manage these threats – if they feel threatened at all.

- Third, the on-going attempts by the United States to pass a new UNSC resolution to transform the current U.S.-dominated occupation force in Iraq into a truly multinational UN peacekeeping mission under U.S. command show that the Bush Administration is ready to give the UN a greater role that goes beyond simply helping to improve the humanitarian situation. Due to the skyrocketing costs of the U.S. stabilization and reconstruction operation in Iraq – running at about US\$1 billion per week – President Bush has already been forced to ask Congress for a supplemental allocation of about US\$87 billion for FY2003/04, a move harshly criticized by an American public having to cope with rising unemployment and massive budget deficits.

Clearly, high-profile neocons such as Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary, Richard Perle, until recently head of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Advisory Board, or William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard* were the intellectual godfathers of Operation Iraqi Freedom. United by their belief that the United States needs to exercise more leadership to promote democracy abroad and use its military in a preventive and pre-emptive manner, as well as their instinctive distrust of multilateral institutions, notably the UN, these neocons were instrumental in preparing and conducting the military operations to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. However, the recent launch of U.S. operation "Let's Get Help From the UN" indicates that Colin Powell's multilateralist-minded State Department is gradually gaining the upper hand vis-à-vis the neocon-dominated Pentagon.

- Fourth, U.S. public opinion polls consistently show strong American support for the UN. According to the German Marshall Funds' "The Transatlantic Trends 2003" survey, 70% of Americans, as compared to 77% in 2002, are in favor of strengthening the UN. Not surprisingly, 74% of the European respondents are in favor of strengthening the UN, compared to 75% in 2002. In the United States, public support for US engagement with multilateral organizations is particularly high if the risks and potential costs of (unilateral) action are deemed to be high. However, in the wake of 9-11, the U.S. public is also increasingly concerned about the risks and potential costs of multilateral inaction. Therefore, when asked if it is justified to bypass the UN when vital interests of your country are involved, 36% of Americans and 16% of Europeans agreed strongly, and 21% of Americans and 24% of Europeans agreed somewhat. Whereas 57% of Americans agreed, 53% of Europeans disagreed. This helps to explain why the Bush Administration was able to build majority support for Iraq, even in the absence of a second UNSC resolution. But neocons, be aware! When asked whether U.S. unilateralism is a possible international threat in the next 10 years, 67% (!) of Americans and 78% of Europeans listed it as an extremely important or important threat.
- Fifth, the UNSC is bound to play an important role in the future because all of its five permanent members, Britain, France, Russia, China, and, last but not least, the United States, have a strong national interest in ensuring that it does not become marginalized. For Britain and France, permanent membership of the UNSC is "a unique privilege that buys them exceptional influence, clout, and prestige (it is one reason why it is very difficult to envisage them ever agreeing to exchange their two seats for one 'EU' seat)." Obviously, the composition of the UNSC reflects the power realities of a different era and therefore provides Britain and France influence and prestige out of proportions to their actual weight in world affairs, be it measured in terms of military power, economic might, let alone population size. As the recent crisis over Iraq has vividly demonstrated, France relies heavily on the UNSC to advance its vision of "Great Power" status in a multi-polar world, even at the cost of antagonizing the United States.

For Russia, the UNSC provides an opportunity to demonstrate that it is still an important player whose cooperation and input is needed to address issues of international concern.

While Russia's economic situation has improved significantly since 1998, the UNSC still plays a crucial role in providing the country's humiliated political and military elite with some comfort over its lost superpower status. For China, a country convinced that it will be the world's next superpower anyway, the UNSC has so far mainly been used to punish countries that support its "renegade province" Taiwan. Furthermore, China has normally abstained from UNSC resolutions passed under Chapter VII to demonstrate its passive opposition to outside interventions in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries. Finally, for the P5 and other UN member states, the UN and its Security Council also often serves as a "scapegoat for the vanities and follies of statesmen" and has thus provided cheap and convenient cover for the failure of their own foreign policies. This "Blame-It-on-the-UN" approach was frequently adopted in the 1990s in response to the failure of the UNSC to agree on a joint plan of action vis-à-vis the genocide in Rwanda or the wars and ethnic conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, and elsewhere.

- Finally, previous predictions of the imminent demise of the UN – made in the wake of inaction in Rwanda, deep divisions over the war in Kosovo, etc. – have not materialized and the UNSC, after an initial cool-off period, eventually managed to reclaim a more prominent and constructive role in dealing with threats to international peace and security.

Ultimately, the future role of the UN, and in particular its Security Council, will be determined by several interrelated factors:

- First, the ability of the UN to serve effectively both as an 'arena' and as an international 'actor' to jointly address issues of global and vital national concern, like terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, etc. The UN's 'arena' function is especially important in the run-up to UNSC decisions on the threat and actual use of political, economic or military sanctions under Chapter VII. It is at this stage that high-level negotiations in the UNSC, notably among the P5, allow the members involved to discuss their positions, make concessions and achieve quid pro quos from other members in an effort to forge resolutions that get a majority of the UNSC votes and prompts none of the P5 to cast a veto, the diplomatic sledgehammer of last resort. Once major military combat operations – normally under the command of one important UN member state – are over, the UN often comes into play as an actor in its own right, primarily through the direct administration and reconstruction of war-torn countries and the work of its specialized agencies like the UNHCR, WFP, etc. Since the end of the Cold War, the UN has acquired valuable nation-building or, to be more precise, state-building experience in countries as varied as Cambodia, East Timor, Bosnia, Kosovo, etc. It is this vast experience, along with the multinational character of UN operations, which confers greater legitimacy, that makes the UN an important potential actor in the international arena.
- Second, the attitude of the United States vis-à-vis the UN. For most Americans, multilateral engagement with the UN is not an end in itself; rather, the UN is regarded as a potential tool to advance U.S. interests and deal with perceived threats to international peace and security. If the UN and its Security Council fail to properly address matters of vital U.S. national interests – like in the Iraq crisis – the United States clearly reserves the right to act unilaterally, including the use of military force, to defend its interests. Europeans, in contrast, tend to regard the UN as the quasi-sacrosanct embodiment of international law and order. The Europeans are not only much more reluctant to bypass the UNSC; in contrast to the Americans, they also generally lack the military clout and power projection capabilities to launch the kind of large-scale military operations that have come to be regarded as the hallmark of U.S. unilateralism. Europeans do not really expect the UN to remove threats to their security; rather they are simply trying to manage these threats through dialogue in multilateral fora such as the UN. For the Americans, however, a UN

that does not contribute to clear-cut security solutions – i.e., removing the threats – is part of the problem.

Europeans should forego the temptation to try to use the UN, and notably its Security Council, as a means to tie down and weaken the American Gulliver. On the one hand, such an ill-conceived strategy runs the risk of provoking the United States to increasingly resort to unilateral actions and would thus ultimately lead to the weakening of the UN. On the other hand, such a strategy could also potentially lead to a “Fortress America”, a situation where the United States turns increasingly isolationist, abdicates many of its international responsibilities, and focuses primarily on security and prosperity at home. Such a U.S. retreat would create serious power vacuums, especially in Asia, and risks to trigger new regional arms races once the protective umbrella of the benign U.S. hegemon has been withdrawn and erstwhile allies such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and others are left out in the rain. The Europeans must recognize that a lack or non-application of American power to effectively shape the international security environment is ultimately far more threatening to peace and security than a United States that is actively engaged in the world, sometimes bypassing the UN to launch unilateral actions in defense of its vital national interests.

- Finally, the UNSC is clearly up for a serious reform that more accurately reflects today’s power realities. For that end, it should enlarge and include key countries such as Japan, India, Nigeria, Brazil, etc. as permanent, non-veto-wielding UNSC members. The P5 in general, and France and Britain in particular, would be very reluctant to agree to confer the right of veto to other countries. Furthermore, an organization where Libya, as just happened, was selected by African countries to head the UN Commissions on Human Rights while the United States was voted out of it, should have difficulties justifying the kind of high moral esteem that the UN is held in by many Europeans. As Shashi Tharoor, UN Under Secretary, has noted perceptively, “the worst fear of any of us, is that we fail to navigate an effective way between the Scylla of being seen as a cat’s paw of the sole superpower and the Charybdis of being seen as so unhelpful to the sole superpower that they disregard the value of the United Nations”.

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