



The United Nations Rediscovered?

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Last year, the president of the United States declared the United Nations “irrelevant” to the future of Iraq, perhaps even to any major problem of international peace and security. Heady notions of remaking the world through the exercise of national military power were in the air. In Iraq, there would be a fearsome lesson in regime change. There would be democratization of the Middle East; and coalitions of the willing would take the place of that perverse old U.N. Security Council. The war on terror would be reinforced by punitive example, by the unilateral prevention of hostile acts against the United States. These and other fantasies prevailed over both common sense and expert opinion. Only the steadfastness of the armed forces of the United States prevented the resulting debacle from being even worse.

Faced with the predictable nightmare of Iraq’s religious and ethnic divisions, a stubborn and violent guerrilla resistance, and the establishment in Iraq of an operational al-Qaeda network, not to mention an election at home, Washington was to hand over sovereignty to the Iraqis on June 30. The United States, almost enthusiastically, dumped the task of political middleman and electoral organizer on the United Nations, while a new Security Council resolution has sanctioned the handover and conferred other tasks on the world organization. This is quite a switch in U.S. policy, and, quite possibly, the mother of all poisoned chalices for the United Nations. If the hydra-headed resistance continues, the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq, with its task of advising and supporting the interim government,

will be an obvious target, notwithstanding the Security Council’s creation of a special military organization to provide security for the U.N. mission.

In previous missions, the U.N.’s chronic dilemma of responsibility without power has been mitigated by both practical and political support from governments and by its traditional status as an impartial body welcomed by all parties to a problem. In today’s Iraq, the very concept of representative and orderly government, and all those who work for it, Iraqis and foreigners alike, are at present under murderous attack from al-Qaeda and like-minded groups. After June 30, the main security force will still be the U.S.-led coalition, the main target of the resistance. In fact, al-Qaeda has already proscribed the United Nations and its representatives as enemies. If all that, and the inherently divisive nature of the Iraqi state, were not enough, Iraq has little experience of representative institutions or of the infrastructure that a working democracy requires. Nor will the U.N.’s traditional enemies in the United States, some of them the founding fathers of the current debacle in Iraq, be slow to maximize any U.N. shortcomings. The current oil-for-food scandal, the facts of which have yet to be established, is just a practice run. The new Security Council resolution is a considerable step forward, but in practice many potential pitfalls remain.

Although the United Nations, and in particular Secretary General Kofi Annan and his representative in Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi, were indispensable to the U.S. handover of sovereignty in late June, this temporary

dependence does not necessarily point to a new relationship between the United Nations and the United States. The murky negotiations that led to the selection of Iyad Allawi as prime minister, despite his close ties with the CIA, are a case in point. In carefully chosen words, Brahimi put the matter candidly: "The Americans were governing this country, so their view was certainly taken into consideration. Whether Dr. Allawi was their choice, whether they maneuvered to get him...in position—that, I think, you better ask them." Future developments in Iraq could easily turn into another exercise in the traditional use of the United Nations as a dumping ground for politically damaging—even insoluble—problems. In that case, another traditional function of the United Nations, as scapegoat for the disasters created by national policies, will come into play later this summer. Let us hope not.

The U.N.'s Strengths and Weaknesses

Especially now, as a demanding new burden is being placed on the United Nations, it is essential to bear in mind the present weaknesses as well as the strengths of the world organization. Iraq will certainly be a rigorous test of the U.N.'s political capacity as well as of its ability to organize and improvise in an unusually violent and complex situation. Beyond that, what is the present capacity of the United Nations for dealing with the very scary new face of danger in the first years of the twenty-first century? And what can be done to make that capacity more adequate and more convincing?

Although there is often much talk of U.N. reform, in practice governments strongly resist discussing the basic political reasons for the U.N.'s shortcomings, preferring to criticize the secretariat and to rearrange elements of the bureaucracy. From its earliest days, the United Nations has had to live with false assumptions that major governments have found it inconvenient to talk about.

The most debilitating of these assumptions has been the concept of the unanimity of the permanent members of the Security Council, a notion dating from wartime 1945 and the victorious World War II alliance. The negative side of this concept is the veto. The supposedly positive, but often profoundly misleading, side is the notion that at the center of the U.N.'s peace and security function is a benevolent and responsible group of the world's most powerful nations, and that these governments can be relied on to agree and to act responsibly, at least in really serious situations. As late as last year, the disagreement over Iraq rudely reminded the world once again that this consensus is often absent. What is more, in striving to avoid a veto, the council's permanent members have often caused unconscionable delays and ended up with feeble compromise resolutions in critical situations that should have been treated with rapid and decisive action. A further weakness is that the council's current permanent membership represents the power structure of the world of 1945 and is now, to a considerable extent, an anachronism. Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America have no permanent representation in the Security Council.

The authors of the U.N. Charter believed that arms races had been a major cause of war in the past. They believed that a collective security system, monitored, and if necessary enforced, by the permanent members of the Security Council, would allow a major degree of world disarmament. This was another false assumption. Within three years of the 1945 San Francisco Conference, the greatest arms race in history, including weapons of mass destruction, was under way among those same permanent members. To this day, more than 80 percent of the thriving global market in arms originates with the five permanent members of the Security Council. The high level of violence in the world is sustained to a considerable extent by this arms bazaar, and we have

recently learned that there has also been a free market in nuclear weapons supplies.

When the original dream of collective security and disarmament vanished in the Cold War, the United Nations, for 40 years, had to find its way through a process of readjustment and improvisation. The Security Council was to a considerable extent paralyzed by the Cold War. The process of decolonization, the speed of which had not been anticipated at San Francisco, created power vacuums and points of friction and violence in sensitive regions of the world—the Middle East, Kashmir, Southeast Asia, and, later on, Cyprus, the Congo, and elsewhere in Africa. Because such regional conflicts might otherwise trigger the dreaded East-West nuclear confrontation, the Security Council was able to agree that most regional conflicts should be contained by the United Nations without the direct involvement of the Soviet Union and the United States. This gave rise to the new technique of U.N. peacekeeping, managed by the secretary general under the authority of the Security Council.

The secretary general was originally intended to be a largely administrative official. But with the Security Council paralyzed and the superpowers suspended in a terrifying nuclear balance, a high international official, universally recognized as non-partisan and objective, became a life-saving asset for the international community. The secretary general proved to be remarkably useful in defusing critical situations involving East and West. The peculiar political conditions of the Cold War thus brought about a large expansion of the secretary general's political role.

When the Cold War—and the Soviet Union—unexpectedly came to an end, it seemed possible that the Security Council might at last be able to perform its duties as the charter intended. The council's role in legitimizing Desert Storm, the war against Iraqi aggression in Kuwait, encouraged this belief. It soon became clear, however, that

the nature of peace and security problems had changed. Interstate conflict was in abeyance, and the cases that came before the Security Council in the 1990s were mostly the debris of proxy Cold War conflicts in third world countries like Somalia, Mozambique, Cambodia, or Angola. The United Nations was called on to deal with chaos, violence, and massive suffering within national borders, a task for which the old peacekeeping technique, designed to contain conflicts between states, was not suited. Of some seventeen such U.N. operations, three—Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda—were failures. Perhaps most important in the long run, the question of humanitarian intervention by the United Nations, especially after the Rwanda genocide, could no longer be ignored, and humanitarian intervention seemed to be the most pressing security question for the immediate future.

Then came 2001, the September 11 attacks on the United States, the radical national security policies of the Bush administration, and the second Iraq war. The new U.S. doctrine of unilateral preventive or preemptive war was in direct contravention of the basic principle enshrined in Article 2.4 of the U.N. Charter—that all nations should refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial or political independence of any state. However, the war in Afghanistan, and especially the occupation of Iraq, have shown dramatically the practical limitations of the doctrine of preventive war. It has become embarrassingly clear that even the greatest military power in history, although it can easily win the opening battle, has immense difficulties in dealing with guerrilla or terrorist resistance, with generating sound democratic government, and with bringing preventive operations to a satisfactory conclusion. When two such operations are undertaken at the same time, even the resources of the United States become overextended. Moreover, preventive war is a very doubtful proposition if a state,

even a destitute country like North Korea, may have nuclear weapons.

Thus the United Nations—irrelevant in 2003, indispensable in 2004—has reluctantly been brought back into play in the debacle in Iraq and, for all its shortcomings, is beginning to be seen again as perhaps, after all, the soundest approach to the world's problems of peace and security.

Needed: A Radically New Approach

Iraq aside, to what degree is the United Nations, in its present state, capable of assuming a central role as the guardian of the peace and security in a world that has suddenly become dramatically less secure? To what degree is the United Nations capable of dealing with the new face of danger—the deadly triad of global ideological suicide terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the problem of rogue or dysfunctional states?

The United Nations has a unique asset, the secretary general and his special representatives throughout the world. The preventive diplomacy of Kofi Annan and his team is largely unknown to the public. Indeed, its confidentiality is one of its major assets. When U.N. diplomacy is successful, it is taken for granted and not publicized. After the United States ousted the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the United Nations took the initiative in organizing, through Annan's representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, the Bonn conference that produced the transitional regime still led by Hamid Karzai. Later on, Brahimi played a key role in getting a constitution approved. In Iraq, Brahimi was required to undertake the even more daunting task of cobbling together a new government that was "fully sovereign," though nobody yet is quite sure what that means in practice.

The secretary general and his representatives, however, have only skill, patience, determination, and their reputation for integrity and fairness. Action backed by power, and if necessary by force, has to originate

in the Security Council. For the U.N. Security Council, timely decision making has usually been a problem. At present, in spite of pious regrets for the failure to do anything about the genocide in Rwanda, there is no general agreement on humanitarian intervention, especially when the need is urgent. To take a current instance, nothing practical has so far been done to check the forceful ethnic cleansing of some million people in the Darfur region of Sudan.

Immediate intervention to deal with an active threat of either nuclear proliferation or terrorism, or with failed/rogue states will present an even greater problem if the Security Council carries on with its traditional way of making decisions. The council has in the past almost invariably *reacted to* disasters rather than *anticipating* them. This is certainly better than nothing, but in an age of large-scale terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, mere reaction to disaster is obviously not good enough. The traditional weapons of diplomatic, economic, or military pressure will not deter or delay such threats, originating, as they will, from groups completely outside the traditional international community. Often only expeditious action will have any effect. Thus, future relevance of the Security Council depends on a radical change in its attitude to emergency preventive intervention, perhaps one of the most difficult questions the council has ever faced.

The next problem is the U.N.'s *ability* to take action. The United Nations has no reliable, standing capacity to take emergency action against violence or threats of violence. As Kofi Annan once ruefully remarked, it is the only fire brigade in the world which, when the alarm sounds, must first procure a fire engine. At present, it takes at least two or three months to assemble and deploy a U.N. peacekeeping force. This is bad enough for a violent, primarily humanitarian disaster. It is quite literally irrelevant to the new dangers posed by suicide

terrorism or nuclear proliferation. The U.N. system already performs important functions—conducting inspections, coordinating action, formulating new rules—in relation to both terrorism and nuclear proliferation. However, when immediate emergency action is required, the world must, at present, look elsewhere. This lack of both capacity and will to act speedily is, incidentally, one of the strongest arguments for unilateral preventive action, except, of course, that so far that approach has proved not to work very well either.

NATO, coalitions of the willing, and other non-U.N. groups are increasingly called on to take up peacekeeping duties in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Individual states sometimes fill the gap between the emergency and the arrival of a U.N. peacekeeping force, as, for example, Australia did in East Timor. The United Nations, whose primary function is the maintenance of international peace and security, has no capacity of its own to take immediate action, and in the worst of crises, like Rwanda, it has been unable to find countries willing to act in its name.

The first suggestion that the United Nations needed its own rapid reaction team was made in 1948 by the first secretary general, Trygve Lie, in relation to the violent situation in Jerusalem. The disapproval of the permanent members of the Security Council, for once in agreement, quickly buried that idea. Since the end of the Cold War, hardly a year has passed without one or two situations in which a U.N. rapid deployment force would have prevented vast suffering, not to mention the subsequent chaos that often proved extremely costly to the international community. This inability to take immediate and effective action has contributed greatly to the widespread, if unfair, view that the United Nations is a talking shop that is inefficient, dilatory, and unreliable in the field. Governments, who sometimes join in this criticism, remain for the most part adamantly opposed to the idea

of a standing U.N. rapid reaction force, largely on political grounds, because it might give the United Nations some hint of sovereign power. While there are plenty of arguments against such a force, there is one overwhelming argument for it. If the United Nations is to continue to pretend to deal with practical emergencies all over the world, it is indispensable.

Today's prevailing sense of insecurity all over the world has many causes, of which the most frightening, in the West at least, are terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. At present, governments are desperately searching for better ways to deal with them. It is generally agreed that, to succeed, this has to be a collective effort. The United Nations was designed to be, among other things, the world's primary agency for maintaining international peace and security, and the center for harmonizing the policies of nations on important matters. If it is to be able to carry out those functions in the alarming conditions of the early twenty-first century, it needs a radically new approach to its peace and security functions, a new degree of support and consensus from its members, and a renewing of its spirit and its structure. ●

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Postscript—

Since this essay was written, an interim government has assumed sovereignty in Iraq. It is too soon to judge how Iraqis will accept this government, or whether it can deal with the resistance.

At the United Nations, the secretary general's High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change will report by December. Its proposals, and the Security Council's reaction to them, will be a test of whether the U.N.'s principal organ for peace and security is capable of significant change in its approach to its task.

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