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**Global Insights: Washington's Exceptionalism and the United Nations**

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## **Washington's Exceptionalism and the UN**

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It is still too early to be definitive about what the American-led action in Iraq will mean for the future of Iraqis, for regional stability, and for the United Nations. Answers will have to wait until the future of Iraq itself is clearer, particularly whether the Iraqis can transit into peaceful self-government or will descend into civil war. Some things are, nonetheless, clear enough already. One is that what little consensus there was internationally on the nature of the major threats facing the international community, and how to respond to them, has diminished. Another is that with the evaporation of its stated *casus belli*, viz., a threatening Iraq armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) cooperating with Al Qaeda, the United States has significantly deepened the hole it had already dug for itself in international public opinion. Further, the exceptionalistic selfview of Washington is neither concentric with others' perceptions of the United States nor conducive to securing their cooperation. With its Iraq enterprise in jeopardy and November's elections at risk, Washington apparently sees renewed utility in cooperating with the UN in Iraq. But the Iraq war has caused substantial harm to the United Nations. Whether and how effectively the U.N., which already had its own problems, notably a Charter written in and for another age, will be able to respond could be decisive to its future.

The debate that commenced spontaneously in the United States after the horrific losses of 9/11 about "why these people hate us so much" ended nearly as quickly as it began. People came too readily to the conclusion that the impetus for anti-Americanism, of which terrorism was the most virulent manifestation, was to be found predominantly, even exclusively in America's successful,

creative, and innovative society. It was assumed that terrorists hated the U.S. not for what it did but for what it was that the issue was essentially existential and, therefore, not resolvable.

This precipitous conclusion was more wrong than right. Although the United States is not necessarily seen as a source of enlightenment and model for emulation, it is respected abroad, extremist, medieval Islamic terrorists notwithstanding, precisely because of its extraordinary domestic successes, because of what it is. What is missing in America's understanding of the resentment it faces is the pervasive and oft-times negative impact of U.S. foreign policy, of what the U.S. does, abroad.

American policy towards the U.N. in recent years has embittered many others. Official U.S. attitudes have arguably never been so contemptuous. Richard Perle, the most vocal and visible of the neo-cons, probably spoke for many in the current administration about two possible benefits from attacking Iraq: the disappearance of Saddam Hussein and the end of the world body: "Thank God for the death of the UN ", he wrote in the Guardian.

It has not always been so. The last time that the U.S. enjoyed a unipolar moment, it proceeded very differently. In 1945, the U.S. bestrode the earth in some respects as colossally as it does today, but first Franklin Roosevelt and then Harry Truman chose cooperation over competition and international law over the survival of the fittest. John F. Kennedy called for the United Nations to become "a genuine world security system . . . capable of solving disputes on the basis of law." Most American presidents, although conscious of the UN's real limitations and despite

occasional significant disappointments, saw value in the organization.

Until the threat that the Iraqi morass presented to the Bush presidency became evident, key people in Washington made no effort to hide their impatience with a nettlesome United Nations. They believed U.S. security could be best, in fact only assured by American military power. Nor were treaties or international law or the United Nations needed to convey legitimacy to U.S. action. The U.S. would have multilateral cooperation on its own terms, or not at all. If, as with the International Criminal Court (ICC), that meant one law for the goose and another for the gander that was just the reality of American exceptionalism. Disaffection and hostility towards the United States were inevitable consequences.

How did the U.S. and so many others, including its allies, come to this divide? September 2001 provides part of the explanation, especially the consequent recalculation of American security interests in the National Security strategy. But it was not preordained that such a recalculation would produce a unilateralist, preventive course. The Al-Qaeda attacks had triggered world-wide revulsion towards their perpetrators and sympathy towards the victims. The General Assembly and the Security Council immediately had expressed solidarity and required member countries to support the fight against terror. Some governments dispatched combat forces to fight along-side Americans in Afghanistan. There was nothing in the reactions to the attacks on New York and Washington to justify a unilateralist policy response.

One major current difference now from the unipolar moment of 1945 is the lack of any

international check or balance on U.S. power. Elegant but self-serving theories have appeared in order to explain the inevitability of American dominion and to justify its exceptionalist manifestations. The European Union indulged itself in a world of Kant, while the U.S. was stuck with Hobbes, reflecting Venus and Mars according to a popular book. All that separated civilization from chaos was the Washington willingness to project power. A corollary has been that others, particularly feckless allies, owe the reigning hegemon decent loyalty, at least when it decides an action is in its vital interest. There is no patience with moral qualms or strategic quibbles.

The United States has had some extraordinary foreign policy successes. American participation in World War II was integral to the defeat of the Axis powers. The containment of the Soviet Union and communism, led by the U.S., were signal achievements of the second half of the 20th century. North-east Asia might long since have exploded had it not been for the stabilizing effects of America military and economic power and diplomatic acuity.

At the same time, it is equally evident that the U.S. can, and does, make errors. The overthrow of the democratically-elected Mossadegh government in Iran is still impacting global politics. The war in Vietnam cost 60,000 American combat deaths and millions of Vietnamese casualties and indelibly colored attitudes towards the United States. The U.S. acquiesced at least in the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Chile. There were also costly errors in Cuba, Central America, and Columbia. In the U.S. cooperation with the mujahideen in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, and with Saddam Hussein demonstrated a

breathhtakingly counterproductive Cold War myopia. Many perceive American policy in the Middle East to have become driven by U.S. politics. All of this, plus Iraq, has led some to see the U.S. as much problem as solution.

The fight in the Security Council in the summer of 2002 over the International Criminal Court presaged what was to come on Iraq. Washington, driven by its own Orwellian interpretation of the powers of a nascent ICC, held UN peacekeeping hostage. Most other governments, including virtually every other democracy, saw the ICC as a means of ending the immunity from prosecution of the world's worst political monsters, not U.S. service personnel. Extensive safeguards against judicial politicization, many proposed by the U.S., had been willingly incorporated into the ICC statute by the states parties. Also, the ICC principle of complementarity precluded ICC action where states diligently investigated and prosecuted crimes committed by their own nationals.

At issue was not just an entirely routine Bosnian mission mandate rollover, but the very idea of a permanent court attacked by the U.S. with little regard for collateral damage to the U.N. Charter and to international law. Washington pressed the Security Council relentlessly to re-interpret the Rome Statute and override the plainly stated views of the states party to that treaty and the history of its negotiation. Such pressure carried with it a threat to the integrity of all treaties. If an ex-post-facto reinterpretation of the ICC statute were possible, what prevented similar reinterpretations of any other treaty, for example, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty? By insisting on acting under Chapter VII of the Charter, the U.S. was effectively treating either

peacekeeping or the ICC as a threat to international peace. Washington put the council into the position of acting at least extralegally, even illegally. Security Council members eventually succumbed to enormous U.S. pressure, thereby purporting to shield the U.S. (as well as China and Russia) from the reach of the Court, albeit on an annually renewable basis.

The ICC experience may have persuaded Washington that it could win any contest in the Security Council if it only brought enough pressure to bear. At the same time, other states appear to have been strengthened in their resolve not to let the Council again bend to such pressure. The muscular U.S. tactics on the ICC were to backfire on Iraq.

On Iraq, Washington appeared to regard the UN as, at best, an instrument for rallying support for U.S. action, and, at worst, an unhelpful artifact from another era. As U.N. chief weapons inspector Hans Blix has noted, UN weapons inspectors were made particular objects of ridicule, which is all the more surprising given the extent to which U.S. and other intelligence services had depended on them over the years to corroborate third-party allegations. Throughout the latter part of 2002 and the first quarter of 2003, a steady stream of invective was directed at an institution that most other members considered to be central to their national interests. At no time did it seem to register in Washington that a large number of UN member states disagreed with the U.S. position that war was necessary and urgent and that that disagreement mattered.

The rhetorical targets were not limited to the UN. Canada was warned not to pursue a compromise, precisely because it might delay the war. Ironically, it might also have bought the

U.S. more time to deploy troops for the aftermath, and attracted more international support for military action. The Germans were chided for playing electoral politics on a Washington policy initiative rolled out on the eve of the U.S. 2002 mid-term elections. The Russians were mocked for protecting their economic self-interest, while Haliburton positioned itself at the center of Iraqi reconstruction. The French, who believed that the Iraqis had already been substantially disarmed, and who were right, were derided for lack of principle. Capitals were pressed to recall uncooperative ambassadors.

In the meantime, the U.S. State of the Union speech had repeated the hoax that Iraq had bought uranium from Africa. In the Security Council, only days after saying at the Davos World Economic Forum that the United States had earned the trust of the world, the U.S. Secretary of State laid out an extensive bill of probably never-to-be-corroborated accusations against the Iraqis. "Meet The Press" was told by the Vice-President in March 2003 that the Iraqis had reconstituted their nuclear weapons an assertion that much later was acknowledged as a mistake. Mobile weapons laboratories were still being cited as proof of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in January 2004, after the U.S. Chief Weapons Inspector David Kay found that the U.S. had been wrong on the existence of WMDs across the board. "The bottom has indeed dropped out of support for the U.S.A", according to the Djerejian report on public diplomacy that Washington itself commissioned.

U.S. action has, also, occasioned the U.N. much harm. The world organization's problems, however, cannot simply be laid at Washington's door. The Charter was written in a different age.

In particular, a glaring contradiction exists between the most basic purpose of the U.N. "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and one of its cardinal tenets, state sovereignty, since most contemporary wars arise within not between countries. Tragically, the depiction of the Iraq war as one of humanitarian purpose has complicated the task of using military force for human protection purposes. National sovereignty is the rationalization why the Charter has little leverage on the crucial nexus of WMDs and terrorism, or on the overthrow of democratically elected governments. The fundamental policy and legal challenge facing the UN is determining when and how to intervene in the internal affairs of member states. Addressing such matters would facilitate the construction of a new consensus between the UN and the U.S. The Iraq war conflated all these issues and made both a common assessment of challenges more difficult and the prospect of UN reform more remote. Moreover, the world organization's problems are complicated by the rigidities inherent in its regional and especially cross-regional groups. The hoary Non-Aligned Movement and the equally outdated G-77, holdovers from a bygone age, have become engines of group-think given to lowest common denominator outcomes.

If the UN is to regain its essential effectiveness, its members are going to have to accept a new meaning of state sovereignty, one which facilitates not impedes international cooperation on this century's pressing human security problems (end-note 13), and one which responds to the causes of American insecurity. The United States, for its part, will need to temper its own exceptionalism, and cooperate with others on those global issues that can only be resolved multilaterally. It took the suffering of the second world war to create the United Nations. Perhaps the shock of the second Iraq war will accelerate the reform the world body so greatly

needs.

## Notes

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1 Richard Perle, "Thank God for the Death of the UN," Guardian, 21 March 2003. Perle has been the most overt of the U.N.'s critics, but by no means the only. Interested readers should consult, for example,examplePresident Bush's speech to the United Nations September 12, 2002 and Vice-President Cheney's interview on Meet the Press, March 16,2003.

2 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," Foreign Affairs 70, no. 1 (1990/1991): 23-33.

3 See, for example, Stephen C. Schlessinger, Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations (Boulder: Westview, 2003).

4 John F. Kennedy, Commencement Address at American University, 10 June 1963.

5 Robert Kagan, Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order (New York: Knopf, 2003).

6 Condoleezza Rice "I think there was disappointment in the United States that a friend like Canada was unable to support the United States in what we considered to be an extremely important issue for our security" Globe and Mail, 31 May, 2003

7 Hans Blix, Disarming Iraq (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004)

8 President George W. Bush, State of the Union address, 20 January 2004; Mohamed al Baradei stateent to the U.N.Security Council,january 27, 2003

9Colin Powell, Remarks at the World Economic Forum, 26 January 2004.

10 Dick Cheney, Meet The Press, 16 March 2003.

11 David Kay, Senate Hearing, 28 January 2004. Statement by David Kay on the Interim Progress Report on the activities of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Defense, and The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. 2 October 2003.

12 Edward P. Djerejian. Changing Minds Winning Peace: A New Strategic Dirction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World (Washington: The Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World,

2003) 19.

See International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect*

(Ottawa: IDRC, 2001), and the accompanying research volume by Thomas G. Weiss and Don Hubert, *The Responsibility to Protect: Research Bibliography, and Background* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001).