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“Irrelevant” UN, “Irreverent” US: Whither Institutionalism After Iraq?

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Introduction

In recent international relations discourse, supporters and detractors of the United States have agreed on one thing: US foreign policy under the George W. Bush administration has evinced an aggressively internationalist agenda; it sees selective engagement in multilateral diplomacy and institutions as useful only insofar as these serve to promote and protect US interests. This brand of “a la carte multilateralism” has provoked criticism of America as being arrogantly unilateralist, revisionist, or imperialist.

On the other hand, the view of the United States as the world’s sheriff—reluctant or trigger-happy—cannot be separated from the perception of the United Nations as an increasingly irrelevant if not inept institution. Indeed, few would argue that the UN is not in need of reform. Chronically under-funded and constrained by a largely outmoded charter espousing commendable principles but also cumbersome laws, the UN is subject to the whims of its member states as well as the widespread use (and abuse) of veto power by the Security Council’s Permanent Five. Nevertheless the UN has garnered some significant achievements in the areas of peace operations, economic development, human security and health despite its built-in structural weaknesses.

Balancing Principle Against Power

However concerns for the “human dimension” cannot be successfully realized at the empirical level without the support of hegemonic power. Contemporary international order depends on two interrelated factors: a UN attuned to security challenges, both traditional and human, of the post-9/11 world; and a US which shows less irreverence than it has hitherto for the principles of multilateralism and institutionalism. The Bush administration has not demonstrated serious concern for human and other non-militaristic aspects of security in Iraq and the wider global war on terror. This is not to imply that the world’s foremost democracy and key donor nation finds human security a disagreeable notion. Rather, it is to suggest that a United States geared primarily to fight global terror may find that human security considerations do not always comport with the requirements of its military-oriented anti-terror mission.

Yet it is not inconsistent to say that the UN’s human security mission, were it to succeed, cannot do without robust US support. As Singapore’s Permanent Representative to the U.N has noted, the question confronting the UN today is primarily political, not structural: how best to construct a security architecture predicated upon US leadership and supported by a UN-sponsored legitimacy. In other words, a fundamental source of international order—or “root cause for peace”—today involves finding the right balance (or seeking convergence)

between institutionalist-*cum*-humanistic principles on the one hand, and the preponderant power of the US on the other. The relationship between principle and power is one characterized by both competition and congruence. Hence, the key to minimizing conflict and maximizing cooperation between the UN and the US lies in the successful managing of inherent tensions and exploiting of potential synergies in that relationship.

Recent Developments: An Opening?

In his address to the UN General Assembly on September 12, 2002, President Bush, preparing for war against Iraq, issued a noteworthy challenge. Calling Iraqi “defiance” a threat to UN authority and to “peace,” Bush asked: “Are Security Council resolutions to be honoured and enforced, or cast aside without consequence? Will the United Nations serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be irrelevant?” This charge of imminent irrelevance was reiterated in US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s address to the Security Council on February 5, 2003.

As 2004 approaches, with little progress on Iraq’s post-conflict rehabilitation in sight, the Bush administration seems possessed by what one *Washington Post* columnist has called an “unprecedented bout of multilateralist spirit.” It has launched an all-out drive to obtain a new UN resolution, and is even contemplating negotiations and compromises with the French that would have been unimaginable a short while ago.

However one should not regard these new developments as indicative of a diminution in the US unilateralist impulse, or an abandonment of its militaristic agenda. If anything, the shift toward greater multilateral engagement in this case is likely better understood as an attempt by the Bush administration at *recalibrating* rather than transforming its foreign and security policy, at least where Iraq is concerned.

By most accounts, this recalibration is tactical rather than strategic in nature. Even so, the quagmire in which the United States currently finds itself in post-Baathist Iraq not only underscores the need for well thought-out exit strategies, but the importance of a robust institutional response to post-conflict rehabilitation, whether in terms of U.N. involvement or of NATO. In short, institutionalism is not yet dead as an ordering principle for international security in the post-9/11 world.

The Case for (Reviving) Institutionalism

Analyst G. John Ikenberry in *After Victory* (2001) posits that a key source of international order is to be found in the immediate aftermath of major wars when the winners decide how best to turn power into order. More specifically, what can the hegemonic state do with its preponderant power? In Ikenberry’s view it can do at least three things:

- First, it can use its commanding material capabilities to dominate over other states; or *imperialism*.
- Second, it can abandon the endless rounds of disputes and conflicts and adopt a self-detachment about international affairs or *isolationism*.
- Third, it can try to transform its favorable power position into a durable international order that commands the allegiance of other states within that order or *institutionalism*. To achieve this outcome, the hegemonic state has to allay the anxieties of weaker states regarding its pursuit of either imperialism or isolationism.

Institutionalism, in Ikenberry's opinion, is the most optimal option for establishing and preserving international order and stability in the modern state system, for the following reasons:

- A hegemonic power can use institutional strategies as restraints on indiscriminate and arbitrary uses of state power;
- The hegemonic power can employ institutions to successfully trade off short-term benefits for longer-term gains to create a favorable and durable order.

Why America Should Choose Institutionalism

Among the reasons advanced for hegemonic powers such as the United States not to "go it alone" in the post-9/11 era three are noteworthy:

- Multilateral institutions, such as the U.N., W.T.O., and APEC, though not without difficulty, can be helpful in managing the effects of globalization. Properly functioning institutions can serve as mechanisms for functional cooperation and dispute settlement. In this respect, the U.N. must make itself more relevant and institute the painful but necessary reforms to that end.
- Institutionalism can make the continued exercise of disproportionate U.S. power more palatable to other states. Postwar institutions such as the U.N., GATT, World Bank, and I.M.F., all of which the U.S. helped establish, provided assurance to other states that they can safely lock in their commitments to the emerging postwar international order in return for the exercise of strategic restraint on America's part.
- Imperialism encourages the rise of counter-coalitions and may even provoke "blowbacks." Some respected thinkers have suggested that 9/11 was a plausible backlash against perceived U.S. imperialism.

Conclusion

In today's conflict-ridden world, the attainment of human security is far too important an objective to be frustrated, whether by institutional irrelevance of the United Nations or US irreverence for institutionalist and humanistic principles. Finding the right balance of principle and power and seeking points of congruence if not convergence between the two are critical to ensuring that human security considerations would not be swamped by narrowly defined national interests. The following assumptions could form the basis for a proper framework for UN-US collaboration:

- US primacy in the contemporary international order;
- US leadership, not imperialism or isolationism, as a condition for international order;
- Need for UN to be reformed to avoid becoming irrelevant;
- US-UN cooperation within robust institutional frameworks as a global public good that benefits the international community.

These propositions would underwrite a more favourable and durable international order for the post-9/11 world, without which the realization of human security would prove a highly doubtful enterprise.

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