
Who Needs the U.N. Security Council?

1) The Bush administration, seeking international cover to do what it wants, and 2) everybody else, seeking to rein in the United States. Welcome to the New World Order.

By James Traub

The Mission of France to the United Nations is located on the 44th floor of a high-rise building on East 47th Street, just a few blocks from the U.N. itself. When I went to visit Jean-David Levitte, France's ambassador to the U.N., in the midst of the tortured and enormously protracted negotiations over a resolution requiring Iraq to accept a team of U.N. weapons inspectors and disarm, Levitte drew me to the south-facing plate-glass window of his office and delivered an ever-so-slightly defensive speech on Franco-American amity. "I watched the World Trade Center buildings come down from here," he said. "At that time, France was president of the Security Council, and the very next day, Sept. 12, we introduced Resolution 1368, which, for the first time in U.N. history, described a terrorist attack as a threat to international peace and security"—and thus gave the United States an unequivocal right to retaliate against Al Qaeda and against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The campaign against Al Qaeda represented one of those rare moments when the Security Council swings quickly behind American aims. The U.N. itself felt implicated in the terrorist attack: its headquarters was evacuated both that day and the next, and there was brief talk of holding a Security Council meeting in a local coffee shop. But the moment of solidarity couldn't last. For the Security Council, Afghanistan was a momentary departure from a tradition of conflict resolution; for the Bush Administration, it was the first battle in a global war.

It is not only the United States but also the United Nations that has become a different place after 9/11. Only yesterday, it seems, the great issue was getting an increasingly disengaged United States to pay its back dues and pay attention; now the problem is keeping an aroused America from sallying off on what virtually every other member of the Security Council considers a reckless crusade. The Security Council needs the United States in order for it to play a meaningful role in world affairs, but it appears as though the United States doesn't need the Security Council—or at least that many of the leading mem-

bers of the Bush administration think that it doesn't. Secretary of State George Marshall had predicted in 1948 that should there be "a complete lack of power equilibrium in the world, the United Nations cannot function successfully." And now, for the first time since the U.N.'s establishment, that state of affairs has come to pass.

As the Brazilian ambassador to the U.N. put it archly, 'You have a situation of dual containment: you have to contain the United States; you have to contain Iraq.'

And so the resolution on Iraq has been the first test case of the new world of American supersupremacy. As Gelson Fonseca, the Brazilian ambassador to the U.N., put it archly, "You have a situation of dual containment: you have to contain the United States; you have to contain Iraq." Containing the Bush administration has meant finding a middle ground between rubber-stamping American policy—and thus making the council superfluous—and blocking American policy, and thus provoking America to unilateral action, which of course would make the council irrelevant. Fonseca seemed to feel that containing the U.S. is a harder job than containing Iraq, and possibly a more important one.

As I prepared to leave after talking to Levitte, he said, "You know, I told you this story about Resolution 1368 because I want you to understand something: we want the United States in." Of course they do. But what neither Levitte nor his col-

leagues know for sure is what it will take to keep the Bush administration in. Last week, the Security Council unanimously passed a resolution demanding that Iraq allow the weapons inspectors who left four years ago not only to return but also to conduct more rigorous inspections for signs of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons production. If Saddam rebuffs the inspectors, there will almost surely be war. If he meekly complies, there probably won't. But Saddam may decide to test the fragile entente now reigning in the council by complying well enough for the French and the Russians but not well enough for the Americans. And then... who knows?

The central question posed by the debate over Iraq remains: Is the blessing of the international community so valuable a good that even this administration, at this moment of American power, is prepared to sacrifice something of its freedom of action in order to secure it? And if it is not, what, exactly, is the Security Council for?

The Security Council has for many years been a dim shadow of what it was intended to be by the architects of the U.N. system. In "F.D.R. and the Creation of the U.N.," Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley argue that from the earliest days of World War II, President Roosevelt foresaw a new world order governed by what he called "the Four Policemen"—the United States, Great Britain, Russia and China. The failure of the post-World War I League of Nations had made Roosevelt skeptical of the merits of a world body, but by 1942, Sumner Welles, his under secretary of state, had drawn up a proposal for a "United Nations Authority" with a "security commission" of the four policemen, who would provide the forces needed to quash threats to world peace. At Teheran in November 1943, Roosevelt persuaded Stalin to accept a single, centralized body consisting of all the world's nations and governed by a council dominated by the big four. (France was added later.) Secretary of State Cordell Hull addressed a joint session of Congress and magnificently asserted, "There will no longer be need for spheres of influence, for alliances, for balances of power."

The Security Council, then, was a new system, designed to prevent another 1914 or 1939, in which the most powerful nations would exercise an effective monopoly on force. Sir Brian Urquhart, one of the first employees of the United Nations and later one of its most important chroniclers, says: "We got into World War I owing to a kind of ludicrous diplomatic folk dance that didn't pan out, and there was no international delay mechanism, no breakwater to stop this rush to war; and that's what they set up the League of Nations to prevent. Then in 1939, you had a war caused by unchecked aggression. And so the new side of the U.N. as opposed to the league is that it provides a mechanism for taking action." The Security Council, which would consist of the five "permanent members" as well as 10 other members who would rotate on and off, was intended to serve both as a "delay mechanism" and, should deliberations fail, as an enforcement body.

The United Nations Charter, drawn up in San Francisco in the summer of 1945, makes amazing reading today, when American conservatives talk about signing on to U.N. treaties as

a surrender of national sovereignty. Chapter VII deals with "Action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression." Article 42 of Chapter VII empowers the Security Council to "take such action by air, sea or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security." Article 43 requires U.N. members to make armed forces and "facilities" available to the body "on its call." And Article 47 establishes a "Military Staff Committee," consisting of the five permanent members' chiefs of staff, which would be responsible for the "strategic direction of any armed forces placed at the disposal of the Security Council." What is perhaps even more amazing, from our own perspective, is that Congress passed the U.N. Charter almost without debate.

Nevertheless, it was clear even at the time that the five permanent nations, soon to be abbreviated as the P5, might not permit their foreign policies to be directed by the Security Council. Stalin insisted on veto power for each of the P5 members, as did, if less vehemently, the United States. And then the cold war settled in, and each side used its veto, or the threat of one, to check initiatives dear to the other. Urquhart recalls that the U.S. had agreed to make a "very substantial force" available for Chapter VII enforcement actions, but that the entire arrangement was scuttled in the late 40's when Stalin balked at the idea. Roosevelt's dream of a global police force led by the great powers died before it could even be tested.

But something else was happening at the same time. The process of "decolonization" was unfolding much faster than anyone had expected, and new nations were pouring into the United Nations. Chapter VII was already a memory by the time most of these third-world nations joined, and in any case, the new members were more concerned with economic development than with peacekeeping. Starting in the 1950's, the U.N. began to spawn a whole range of agencies largely directed at the needs of the new members—bodies dealing with health, food, education, relief, refugees and so on. And the culture of the institution drifted further and further from the muscular principles of Chapter VII. This is the domain most of us associate with the U.N.—high-minded confabulations on intractable global problems, solar-powered cookers, declarations on the rights of historically oppressed communities, etc. This sense of an organization preoccupied with terribly important things it can't actually do very much about has not done much for the U.N.'s reputation, at least in the United States.

But the U.N. does not, of course, belong to the United States. David Malone, a former Canadian diplomat who runs the International Peace Academy, a research group far more hardheaded than its fuzzy-sounding name implies, notes: "The U.N. in its own mind is largely about a positive agenda that the agencies deliver. Many members aren't comfortable with anything beyond the positive agenda. They view the fight against bad guys and evil as incompatible with the ethos of the organization and being conducted at the behest of a few big powers they don't trust." By the end of the cold war, 90 percent of the U.N.'s resources were being devoted to the agencies; peacekeeping had become a vestigial activity, carried out largely in quiet places like Cyprus.

AND THEN CAME the U.N.'s very own Prague Spring. The ideological deadlock of the cold war was melting away, and with it the constraints on the Security Council. Saddam Hussein came along just when the Security Council was ready to deal with him. When Iraq overran Kuwait in 1990, the council passed a resolution of condemnation. Once the first President Bush decided on a war, he sought a Security Council resolution before he went to Congress, calculating, correctly, that the authority of the council would pressure the Congress into approval—the exact opposite of the thinking that has governed the current Bush administration. And the council, after a very brief debate, invoked Chapter VII to authorize a coalition force to dislodge the Iraqi forces.

The war was, of course, a great success, and an excited President Bush became the tribune of a new U.N. Veterans of the organization still recall with wonder the speech in which Bush offered to turn over Fort Dix for the training of U.N. peacekeepers. In June 1992, Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, acting at the behest of the permanent five, submitted “An Agenda for Peace,” which argued that the time had come to rejuvenate U.N. enforcement and to make the Security Council the genuine global peacekeeper envisioned by Chapter VII. It was a moment of euphoria throughout the U.N. community. There was a feeling, as Shashi Tharoor, the U.N.'s head of public information and one of its chief institutional voices, recalls, that “every problem can come to us, and we can prescribe a solution.” Boutros-Ghali, Tharoor told me, “even spoke rashly of ‘a problem of too much credibility.’ Within two and a half years he was eating those words, because we had a crisis of too little credibility.”

What happened, of course, was Srebienica—a byword for moral failure. This fiasco virtually discredited U.N. peacekeeping. Perhaps the fault lay less with the U.N. than with the nations of the Security Council, which were unwilling to send the kind of troops needed to counter the savagery of the Bosnian conflict. Perhaps the fault lay with the expectations themselves. William Shawcross wrote an account of peacekeeping efforts titled “Deliver Us From Evil.” That was the job description; but peacekeeping could not deliver the world from evil.

No one knows the answer to the peacekeeping problem. If you ask people around the U.N. what will happen the next time genocide threatens—say, in Burundi—the answer will be, “We’ll authorize a regional organization to go in.” Few people expect a U.N. force of “blue helmets” to venture into mayhem. And if you point out that no “regional organizations” happen to exist in the neighborhood of Burundi—well, that’s true.

THROUGHOUT THE LATE 90’s, conservatives like John Ashcroft accused the Clinton administration of seeking to “subcontract” American foreign policy to the U.N. The Bush administration took office vowing never to fall into that trap. While still an adviser to the campaign, Condoleezza Rice, later Bush’s national security adviser, criticized the belief that “the support of many states—or even better, of institutions like the United Nations—is essential to the legitimate exercise of power.” Legitimacy, for at least most members of the Bush foreign-policy team, arose from a clearheaded assessment of national interest; little could

be expected from the U.N., a moralistic body squeamish about the exercise of power and largely hostile to American interests. Only a few in the administration, most notably Secretary of State Colin Powell, believed that acting in concert with others was such a good in itself that the U.S. should seek to do so whenever possible.

Describing the Security Council, the French U.N. ambassador said, ‘The Americans tend to consider that there is somewhere a supreme power imposing its will on America.’

Exhibit A in the indictment of U.N. pusillanimity handed up by the hawkish wing of the Bush team was policy toward Iraq. In the aftermath of the gulf war, the Security Council established the combination of harsh economic sanctions, “no fly” zones and weapons inspections that more or less kept Saddam Hussein in his cage. But by 1998, inspectors were complaining of constant interference, and in December of that year, the United States and the British insisted—over the objections of the French and the Russians—that the inspectors be withdrawn, and then mounted a bombing campaign directed at Iraqi weapons sites. Since that time, the Security Council had seemed to be much more disturbed by the consequences of confronting Iraq than by the consequences of failing to do so. The big issue in the Security Council last year was not Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction but the harm done by the sanctions. Russia, Iraq’s chief ally among the P5, argued that Iraq had fully disarmed itself of nuclear weapons and began agitating to have the “nuclear file” closed and Iraq be given some benefit for its compliance.

Until Sept. 11 of last year, the Bush administration officially viewed Iraq less as a threat to world peace than as a hopeless mess; Secretary of State Colin Powell had even taken up the call for less burdensome “smart sanctions.” After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Bush administration, worried about Saddam making chemical and biological and nuclear weapons and perhaps allowing them to slip into the hands of terrorists, was prepared to disarm him by any means. When Bush addressed the General Assembly two months ago, he asserted provocatively that the U.N. would turn into a League of Nations if it continued to permit Saddam Hussein to keep inspectors out in defiance of U.N. resolutions.

When I suggested to Levitte, the French ambassador, that the Security Council would never have acted to restore inspectors to Iraq without the American threat of war, he said: “This is absolutely true. But let’s be fair. What is the Security Council? The Americans tend to consider that there is somewhere a su-

preme power imposing its will on America. It is 15 members; it is not a kind of supreme power. And the United States is first among equals.”

And that is why the president’s bristling speech provoked nervous applause, a few snide jokes and, as David Malone of the International Peace Academy says, “an instant refocusing on Iraqi noncompliance.” The threat of war, of course, concentrated many minds, but it is also true that the United States can determine the agenda of the Security Council if it wants to, even if it cannot quite dictate outcomes. That has not always been true, but the era of ideological opposition to the United States, whether from the Soviet bloc or the third world, has largely come to an end; it has been a long time since anyone called for a “new world economic order” to redistribute wealth to poor nations. There is a widespread acceptance in the U.N. of the fact of American supremacy, even if high-handed American behavior has left a deep residue of resentment.

It is, in fact, precisely because the U.N. system cares so much about preserving its own relevance that the members have generally resigned themselves to the new American hegemony. Even the Security Council’s most zealous defenders recognize that it must be a “mirror” of world power in order to remain effective. And so council members have tended to swallow their anger over American arrogance. “With the amount of hair we tear out of our heads over the United States, we should all be bald,” a representative of one of America’s allies put it. You often hear expressions of gratitude over even minimal American gestures of respect for the U.N., like Shashi Tharoor’s comment that “in a case where the United States is acting in the name of the international community, the fact that it has come to seek the blessings of the international community is welcome.”

Diplomats are trained to accept reality and work with it—to play a weak hand as strongly as they can. Whenever I think of the U.N., I picture Gelson Fonseca, the Brazilian ambassador, a charming, bushy-browed, multilingual gentleman possessed of a strikingly sinuous mind. “Diplomacy is about an illusion,” Fonseca told me recently, “the illusion that I am equal to you. When I sit across the table from America, I have the illusion that I can convert you by the force of my argument, and you, in order to sit across the table from me, must share that illusion.” And yet because it is an illusion, Fonseca accepts the fact that the United States cannot be successfully confronted; it must rather, he says, be “seduced”—a very Brazilian approach to diplomacy. What Fonseca means is that diplomacy in the unipolar world must be devoted to coaxing the United States inside the system of rules and institutions. Like many of his colleagues, he has a tremendous fear of a United States freed from those constraints; he would almost rather surrender to American wishes than see the U.S. dismiss the Security Council. “Order,” Fonseca says, “is better than justice.”

AND SO, as the first debate in this new era of American dominance got under way in September, the Security Council was prepared to play a weak hand strongly; but no one could say for sure whether the Bush administration was willing to play at all. The administration had come grudgingly to the negotiating ta-

ble, and the initial draft resolution circulated by the Americans included elements so manifestly intolerable to the Iraqis—like the idea of a military force supporting U.N. inspectors—that it appeared to be designed to be repudiated, and thus to bring about the war that Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other leading figures in the administration were strongly suggesting was the only alternative. This was too great a price for the U.N. to pay. At a gathering in mid-September, a group of diplomats and top U.N. officials asked themselves whether they should simply accept the invitation to rubber-stamp American policy. “The preponderant view was that this was not better,” says Paul Heinbecker, the U.N. ambassador from Canada, which is not currently a Security Council member. “The U.N. has to stand for something; it has to have some principles.”

It was left to the French to state those principles. No major nation cherishes the illusory equality of the U.N. more than the French, whose sense of great-power standing depends almost entirely on their membership in the P5. The French were infuriated in 1998 when the British and the Americans bombed Iraq without seeking council authorization. The French would not permit the council to be sidelined once again. In late September, the French proposed that in the event of Iraqi noncompliance with the inspections regime, the United States be compelled to seek a second Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force. The Russians publicly, and other members of the council privately, backed the French position. After several weeks of deadlocked talks, the Americans, working with the British, proposed compromise language in which the Security Council would “convene immediately” for deliberations in the case of Iraqi noncompliance, though the administration would not have to seek further authority from the council to begin a military assault. This was a *two-step* process, not the *two-resolution* process the French wanted, but it took only a small sophistry to blur the distinction. The French accepted.

I happened to visit Levitte two days after the new American language arrived. Levitte is a rising star in French diplomacy, the former foreign-policy advisor to President Jacques Chirac and a new kind of French diplomat, informal and affable. He insisted that the French position had much less to do with a sense of national prerogative than with the need for a united front. “In France, we have five to six million Muslims,” he said, “between 8 and 10 percent of the population.” In case of war, he went on, “we have to do whatever is possible to limit the bitterness. It is in our common interest to move step by step. If Saddam Hussein violates the rules set by the international community, then it is not a unilateral act of aggression against Saddam Hussein. It is Saddam Hussein who is creating an attack against the international community.”

This was not only a French position; I heard some variant of it from other members of the council and even more from U.N. professionals who feared they would have to live with a Middle Eastern world aflame with anger. For them, “international legitimacy” was not a diplomatic nicety or an abstraction; it was the means by which war became a collective good rather than an exercise in American self-interest. Beyond Iraq, there was anxiety that American action could loose the dogs of unilateralism;

Russia could well cite the Iraqi precedent to take its own war on Chechen terrorism into neighboring Georgia. And so the other council members were imploring the United States to stay inside the international system as the price for their acquiescence to a process that might well lead to war—a war that virtually none of them believed in.

But the French also understood that simply by agreeing to engage in diplomacy, the Bush administration had already accepted some limits on its freedom of action in order to gain the imprimatur of a Security Council resolution. At this critical moment, according to administration sources, Bush had come down on the side of Powell and the multilateralists. What happened? First of all, polls showed that a clear majority of Americans preferred the inspections-first route and would be much more comfortable with a war conducted with United Nations support—a source of tremendous comfort within the United Nations itself. Moreover, the U.N. had hardly been unresponsive as regards the war on terrorism. As Richard Haass, a senior State Department official (and a strong advocate of the multilateralist view), puts it, “This is the second major issue we have brought to the U.N., the first being Afghanistan, and there we did just fine.” Haass adds, “You’ve got to ask yourself what’s the price in terms of delay and constraint, and what the benefits are.”

Those benefits were overwhelming: a military threat backed by a united Security Council would be far likelier to persuade Saddam Hussein to disarm, and in the event of war, the United States would be much likelier to obtain overflight rights and access to Middle East bases. (There would also, in all likelihood, be financial support and international help in administering postwar Iraq.)

And so with Secretary Powell conducting the negotiations (the American ambassador to the U.N., John Negroponte, served largely as a message carrier), the Bush administration ultimately came a long way toward the French position, leaving more latitude to the inspectors and modifying language that appeared to provide a pretext for war no matter what the Iraqis did—what the French called “automaticity.” At the dramatic Security Council meeting at which all 15 nations endorsed the resolution, Negroponte explicitly confirmed that the language permitted no automaticity.

But the session also exposed the continuing deep fears among council members of the administration’s unilateralist impulses. When Ireland’s ambassador to the United Nations said at the meeting, “It is for the *council* to decide on any ensuing action,” no one could mistake his meaning. Bush administration officials, on the other hand, fear that council members will try to block a military response. The era of good feelings could dissipate fast.

EVERY OTHER FRIDAY, the military attachés of the five permanent members of the Security Council meet in a conference room at the U.N., read the minutes of their last meeting—which

consist only of the reading of the minutes of their previous meeting—and then adjourn. This is all that remains of the Military Staff Committee established by Article 47 of the U.N. Charter. And it is virtually all that remains of the founding vision of the Security Council as an institutionalized version of the World War II alliance. And yet as the debate over the Iraq resolution demonstrates, the Security Council has not been consigned to irrelevance. As Edward Luck, the author of “Mixed Messages,” a history of America’s turbulent relationship with the U.N., observes, “While the Security Council may have failed as a military tool, as a political tool it’s more important than ever.” Luck predicts that “the demand of the American public for international authorization is going to become greater and greater.”

The Security Council need not be wholly reduced to its legitimacy-granting function. The U.N. and its various agencies have built up enormous expertise in the thankless task of nation building; one U.N. official says that the Bush administration even approached the organization to take over the civil administration of Afghanistan after the Taliban had been dislodged, a role that it has played in East Timor and elsewhere. (The U.N. had the good sense to decline.) The American resolve to engage in strategic nation wrecking may increasingly force the Security Council, which will be asked to authorize these missions, into the role of picking up the pieces.

But in a world defined by the fight against terrorism, which is to say a world shaped by a single power overwhelmingly preoccupied with the fight against terrorism, the Security Council’s central role will be to shape the terms and establish the conditions under which that fight becomes broadly acceptable. Its job is both to restrain and to license the superpower.

Conservative critics of the U.N., some of whom now occupy important posts in the Bush administration, have long argued that the Security Council is useful only when it accepts American leadership and embraces American interests—which, they would add, is virtually never. And yet what has become obvious in recent weeks is that with only the most modest gestures toward multilateralism on the part of the U.S., the Security Council is prepared to offer that embrace. And the Bush administration is likely to hug back when it suits its needs. It’s a relationship of convenience. But it’s a relationship.

One Security Council diplomat who finds this prospect both professionally pleasing and deeply gratifying to his sense of irony points out that the final draft of the Iraq resolution essentially gives Hans Blix, the head of the U.N. inspection team, the power to decide whether or not the Iraqis are in compliance (though Blix has told the Council he doesn’t want to bear that burden). Blix, he points out, “is a nice, soft-spoken, grandfatherly Swede, not an American, not a warmonger”—the perfect legitimator of the American war effort. “If the war comes,” he adds, “I see Bush making an 8 o’clock speech to the nation, with Hans Blix mentioned at least 10 times.”

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