

The UN and the United States in Afghanistan

By Ian Williams

Since September 11, the United Nations has gained a rare prominence in Washington's calculations. Of course it did once before, when Iraq invaded Kuwait—but that was more like a one-night stand turned date rape than a long-term relationship. This time, it could be a more durable courtship, based on more modest and realistic expectations on both sides.

Of course, we are not talking about selflessness on the part of the various players in Washington. But what one hopes is pragmatic appreciation of the consequences of September 11 and the usefulness, indeed indispensability, of the United Nations as an institution for framing the multilateral responses necessary to international terrorism. After initial restive comments from some of the die-hard unilateralists like Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, the U.S. was careful to return to the Security Council for a resolution to provide legal cover for its attack on the Taliban. The Bush administration also welcomed and supported the appointment of Lakhdar Brahimi as Kofi Annan's Special Representative for Afghanistan. To show it was serious, the administration even made the promised back-payment of \$583 million in dues.

At the same time no one can accuse the UN of hubris. Throughout his first term, Secretary General Kofi Annan has been careful to ensure that the organization is seen as a useful facilitator rather than an independent player. He has continued this low-key role over Afghanistan, which in an odd way has made the organization indispensable for finding solutions there. It is a role played with great finesse by Special Representative Brahimi, the author of a cautionary report last year on UN peacekeeping and its limitations, who from the beginning of his new task has taken considerable pains to downplay the UN's future role on the ground in Afghanistan. He and the UN Secretariat nei-

ther desire nor envisage an East Timor or Kosovo nation-building exercise, let alone the repetition of Somalia or Bosnia.

In his recent report to the Security Council on Afghanistan, Brahimi had suggested—in classic UN manner—three options for the country. He ruled out a UN peacekeeping force completely, while noting a preference for an All-Afghan force (which he regarded as impractical in the short term). He suggested a multinational force for the interim period to secure the cities. At the back of everyone's mind was the fate of surrendering Taliban adherents and the previous fate of Kabul when the Northern Alliance had held it.

Brahimi's report originally envisaged a UN-franchised force, and U.S. and British diplomats were working hard on what were called "Green Helmets"—a multinational force drawn primarily from secular Muslim states, which would fill the gap until a functioning Afghan authority could provide trusted, indigenous security forces. The sudden collapse of the Taliban took almost everybody by surprise. The UN secretariat had perhaps spent a little too much effort drawing up non-contingency plans to avoid being saddled with the responsibility for security—and to avoid being scapegoats for the ensuing, almost certain debacle. Somalia was a haunting example of the UN carrying the can for the U.S. government's refusal to listen to the organization's advice. Faced with the fall of Kabul, Special Representative Brahimi had to accelerate his main task of pulling together a functioning post-Taliban regime.

In this context, the UN's main strengths were its perceived neutrality and Brahimi's own considerable prestige and knowledge of Afghanistan and its factions. Powerlessness has its privileges as well. Like the former King of Afghanistan, the UN's military absence on the

ground has allowed it to act as impartial broker among the warring factions. Like the king, in this quantum world of diplomatic uncertainty, Brahimi can draw strength both from not being the representative of a conquering force, namely the United States, while at the same time from being in some sense a surrogate for Washington. Delegates in Bonn, and later in Kabul, will know that he coordinates his moves with the U.S., so they cannot treat him or the UN too contemptuously.

Not long ago, it would have been surprising to see the U.S. entrust so important a role to the UN, not least when it is so obviously U.S. military strength that provided the spoils over which the surrogate victors are on the edge of quarrelling. But with major players such as Iran and Pakistan to be consulted, not to mention the Afghan factions themselves, the UN and Brahimi are clearly the best game in town.

In the end, as so often, the UN is as effective as the U.S. wants it to be, and Washington has both domestic

and foreign public opinion reasons to want as durable a settlement in Afghanistan as possible. Diplomats and UN senior staff have modest ambitions for the country. From the beginning, they did not expect to build Shangri La in the Himalayas, but rather to avert the very worst outcomes that they feared were all too likely.

It is very likely that for the very reasons of neutrality that gave the UN the task of pulling together the factions, the organization may well have more involvement on the ground than it wants when it comes to rebuilding the country. Certainly in the major cities there is the possibility of some kind of military presence that counts on some form of UN mandate—and maybe even as UN forces. For the good of Afghanistan and for the future of nation-building, it will be extremely important that the operations are planned carefully for optimal results rather than being dumped on the UN.

If the continuing “war against terrorism” is to have international

credibility and support, then the reconstruction of Afghanistan cannot be too egregious a failure. So there is every expectation that the NATO powers will offer the necessary financial and military resources. For example, UN humanitarian operations are likely to need some form of security presence if the Somali experience of looting is not to be repeated. However, the UN caution about being drawn in will be justifiably compounded unless any presence on the ground has the public and unequivocal backing of the United States. The U.S. may not need major forces there, but the lesson of the Balkans is that it should offer credible guarantees of them if any of the Afghan parties step out of line. Given the U.S. public’s and the DOD’s new post-September 11 willingness to support U.S. overseas military operations, this may well be easier than in the past.

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