

Above all Washington needs legitimacy in this war to enjoy multilateral support in the war on terror

The U.S. and the UN: Risking Relevance

By Muqtedar Khan | February 13, 2003

President Bush is determined to attack Iraq. It is also clear that if he cannot convince, he will bully the international community into compliance with his wishes. First Bush and now Powell have threatened that UN Security Council by stating that “it risks irrelevance” if it fails to join with the United States.

Their argument runs as follows: Iraq is in “material breach” of UN Security Council resolution 1444; and therefore unless the UN immediately goes to war against Iraq to impose this resolution, it will lose its international influence. If the UN vetoes U.S. military action, this multilateral institution will become irrelevant because Washington is determined to attack Iraq—with or without the United Nations.

Apparently the UN’s relevance is contingent upon its subservience to U.S. policies. Yet how can the administration ignore that the UN’s approval is necessary in the eyes of many Americans (65% according to a recent *Los Angeles Times* survey)? For Tony Blair, who is supporting the war on Iraq despite 80% opposition from the British public, British democracy and his own people seem to be irrelevant, although the UN’s approval still apparently matters to him. Blair—the lion-hearted poodle—is reluctant to accompany Bush on this new crusade without UN endorsement.

Most American commentators seem to be under the illusion that the U.S. is the world community. Yes, the U.S. is the sole superpower; it has zillions of nuclear bombs and great stacks of chemical and biological weapons and hundreds of thousands of missiles and planes and can kill the entire human race many times over. There’s no doubting its power. But America is not the world. Even if America thinks the UN is irrelevant, there are more than two hundred countries that understand that in this unipolar world the only thing that stands between America’s might and them is the UN.

Thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians will die by the smart weapons that the Bush administration is so eager to launch at them. Right now only the UN stands between them and the United States.

Even if the U.S. attacks Iraq, the Iraqis who survive will still have the UN to thank for the extra months (oh no! weeks not months) that they got to spend with their near and dear ones. Who can predict where America’s smart bombs will land? In Belgrade they landed on the Chinese embassy, in Afghanistan on a wedding party. Will the UN ever be irrelevant to a father who could hug his child for a few extra weeks? We know that American lives are worth far, far more than those of the miserable Iraqis; Madeleine Albright told us that when she justified sanctions that have resulted in the death by disease and hunger of as many as half a million Iraqi children. For an Iraqi mother, her family matters deeply—and therefore the UN is as relevant as the future of her dear ones.

In spite of its rhetoric, the Bush administration recognizes the relevance and significance of the UN in a world so intricately interdependent. That was the principal reason why it initially appealed for support from the world body. Bush did not go to the UN as a charitable gesture to the world. The president went to the UN for two things: legitimacy and post-war reconstruction support. The American economy is on downward spiral. The federal and state budgets are in deficits, unemployment and debt is on the rise. America cannot afford to spend billions of dollars to rebuild Iraq and plant democracy there as it promis-



es. It needs the EU and other UN member-nations to help pay for Iraq's reconstruction.

Above all Washington needs legitimacy in this war to enjoy multilateral support in the war on terror. If the Bush administration thinks it can thumb its nose at the world and ride its hobbyhorse, it must face the consequences for its war on terrorism. Its unilateralism in the Middle East will give rise to a non-multilateral world and an "irrelevant UN," when it very much needs international cooperation in the campaign against international terrorism.

Moreover, if the UN capitulates to the U.S. it will be seen as just another Tony Blair. It will lose its significance. In contrast, by opposing the sole superpower, the UN will gain in prestige and significance for the rest of the world. The Bush argument that the failure to enforce a resolution against Iraq will condemn the UN to the status of a debating society doesn't stand up. It's worth remembering in the U.S. what the rest of the world well knows: that the U.S. has prevented the UN from enforcing several resolutions against Israel for decades, and still the UN is highly regarded among most nations and peoples.

Clearly, the UN cannot enforce its writ unless the major powers are motivated by self-interest and act in concert. But it is also true that the UN can give or strip away the legitimacy of any country's international actions. It can make American actions illegal or legal in the eyes of the international community. If the U.S. attacks Iraq against the will of the UN, it will be against the will of the world—and therefore illegitimate.

In a civilized world, the UN will remain significant as long as it represents world opinion. It is not the U.S. that determines its relevance, but a shared global vision of peace and international legal and humanitarian order that makes it the beacon of hope and harmony that it is. If we choose to part ways with this global vision, it will be America—not the UN—that stands outside the global consensus.

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Recommended citation:

Muqtedar Khan, "The U.S. and the UN: Risking Relevance," FPIF Global Affairs Commentary (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, February 13, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0302relevance.html>

Production Information:

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Editor: Tom Barry
Layout: Tonya Cannariato