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MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

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Who Needs the U.N.?

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There has long been a feeling in the corridors of power in Washington that the United Nations is irredeemably flawed and condemned to ineffectiveness. It is viewed as an irritating constraint on U.S. power, or worse—expensive, wasteful, slow to act, and irrelevant.

The “oil for food” scandal in Iraq, reportedly involving the loss of millions of dollars, has prompted certain members of Congress to call for the resignation of the Secretary General, and there are attempts to reduce U.S. contributions to the world body. President Bush’s sentiments expressed at the time of the U.N.’s deliberations on weapons inspections in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq—that the institution was in danger “of fading into history as an irrelevant debating society”—resonated widely.

In this crisis of confidence is a key question for the United States: does it benefit from, and even need, the United Nations? Put another way, do U.N. weaknesses justify the increasing tendency in Washington to resort to unilateralism? And, from the standpoint of American and global interests, is a more effective U.N. possible and desirable?

Collective Security: A Balance Sheet

The United Nations was born 60 years ago as a collective security organization of 51 states, charged with the responsibility “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” (but understood to mean wars between states), and authorized to reach decisions based on the geopolitics of that time, a system that remains unaltered to this day. The hopes of 1945 have not been fulfilled. By one count, between 1945 and 1989, member states took up arms against one another 680 times.¹ War-related deaths during this period have been put at over 20 million and refugees at three times this number.² Since the end of the Cold War, there have been some 100 additional conflicts, predominantly civil wars.³ How to explain this failure?

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continued from page 1 — Permanent members of the Security Council and other big players, mindful of their own prerogatives of power and protective of their own sovereignty, were careful not to allocate real authority to the Secretary General. The U.N.'s top official is the chief administrative officer of a secretariat servicing member states, not the CEO of the U.N. Plans to provide the U.N. with a standing army and navy were scrapped for the same reason, and the Military Command Committee envisaged in the Charter has never been operationalized. Gridlock in the Security Council impedes action. When peace-keeping or peace-making are authorized, often belatedly, the U.N. has to find the troops from scratch and then operate on a shoestring budget each time.

Its institutional or cultural problems are also vexing. U.N. recruitment and advancement often have more to do with nationality and other factors than with competencies. Transparency in decision-making and admitting to and learning from past mistakes are far from hallmarks of U.N. management. The U.N. is still driven by the wishes its member states, and tends (not without some justification) to blame most of its shortcomings on constraints posed by the structure of member-state dominance rather than boldly exercising its own moral leadership.

But some achievements have been notable, and sustained. In its humanitarian work, U.N. agencies have played a key role in a number of areas. Since 1980, the U.N. Development Program has helped to halve the number of people living in poverty. In the 1950s, only 400,000 people living in developing countries could read and write, but today more than 2.5 billion are literate.⁴ The U.N. led the way in the abolition of apartheid. The World Health Organization (WHO) eradicated smallpox, coordinated worldwide efforts to contain the SARS epidemic, and is a key player internationally in combating HIV/AIDS. UNICEF's work on behalf of the world's children, not least in polio eradication and other immunization, is well known. Since 2001, UNICEF has helped send over 3 million Afghan children back to school.⁵ And since its establishment in 1951, the U.N.'s refugee agency has provided international protection to, and helped find solutions for, more than 50 million refugees.

While unable to prevent conflict in most instances, U.N. peacekeeping units have contributed to sustaining ceasefires once hostilities stopped (in Haiti, Burundi, Kosovo, Cyprus, and Lebanon), and consolidated democratic processes ("nation-building") in Cambodia, and most recently in Timor and Afghanistan. There were 16 such peacekeeping missions in 2004,⁶ most of which are less expensive than unilateral military operations. It is worth noting that the entire worldwide annual budget of the U.N., \$12 billion, is less than that of the \$12.4 billion budget of the New York State Board of Education.⁷

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Legitimacy & American Interests

The United States benefits from these and other multilateral endeavors, just as it does from multilateral economic and trade organizations. In this, U.S. administrations have been uniformly cooperative and supportive. Scholars describe the tradeoffs inherent in the major powers' participation in multilateralism as reducing "transaction costs" of international relations, standardizing many important features of the international system (such as property rights), and, in fact, legitimating the configuration of global power. American domestic politics have generally supported the U.N. system, being largely a creation of Presidents Roosevelt and Truman.⁸ And this domestic support is essential in understanding another aspect of "interests"—the need for political leaders to conform to deeply held beliefs about fair, efficient, and ethical conduct in world affairs.

It is in the security sphere where Americans see the U.N. as problematic. Now, with an almost unrivaled power not seen since the Roman Empire, the United States may naturally tend to sidestep the U.N., especially after the trauma of the 9/11 attacks. The U.S. invasion of Iraq is an obvious case in point. While the United States has the power largely to do what it wishes, however, what it cannot do is to confer international legitimacy on its actions. U.N. weaknesses do not justify unilateralism, which ignores and thus undermines the carefully constructed edifice of international law.

citation

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Legitimacy flows from the expectation that a state's actions fall within the framework of the law, are authorized by the recognized authority, do not violate established legal and moral norms, and, if all these criteria might not be met, that world public opinion would largely support a particular action. The legacy of two world wars has reinforced the importance and development of international law rather than the resort to pure force. And the U.N., however flawed, is seen to be the repository and final arbiter of international law. It represents world opinion. In addition, the U.N.'s durability over sixty years has become a source of its own moral power. "Multilateral diplomacy has come to embody a procedural norm in its own right," as one scholar puts it, ". . . in some instances carrying with it an international legitimacy not enjoyed by other means."⁹

In this light, then, the U.S. policy of unilateral preventive war has set a dangerous precedent, not only because of the false premises of the invasion of Iraq and the high human costs of that action, but because such a "principle" may be imitated by others. Disorder in global affairs is not something rational hegemony should promote. Moreover, sidestepping the U.N., and its legitimating authority in one domain—security—could also set a precedent of encouraging others to bypass the U.N. not only in this vital area (including nuclear non-proliferation), but in other sectors of direct interest to the United States, such as trade. U.S. actions at the Security Council, especially over Iraq, coupled with its rejection of the Kyoto agreement and the International Criminal Court, have isolated it in much of the world.¹⁰ Hard power is one thing; legitimacy is another. Force, to be legitimate and effective, must be exercised on the terrain of law and widely shared norms.

If the United States needs the U.N. to ensure the legitimacy of its actions, it also needs the U.N. for peace building and reconstruction when it decides to withdraw from foreign operations. It needs the U.N. to monitor elections and undertake other post-conflict political tasks. The U.N. is the usual coordinator of humanitarian operations, from the tsunami relief operations of 2005 to combating HIV/AIDS to handling forced displacement, to mention just three examples. And there are few if any alternatives to the U.N., which has the size and experience to perform these vital functions, and this is perfectly consonant with American interests.

Saving the U.N.

If the U.N.'s achievements and importance are acknowledged, then its several defects, while not entirely its fault, should be honestly addressed. It now operates in a landscape vastly transformed since 1945. Most wars occur within and not between states; potential access to weapons of mass destruction has been made easier by processes of globalization; and transnational terrorist groups operate beyond the ambit of state control. Today's global threats should be addressed effectively and collectively. What are the prospects of the U.N. meeting these obligations?

In their report, "A More Secure World, A Shared Responsibility," Secretary General Kofi Annan's panel has recommended options

for changes in permanent Security Council membership to better reflect contemporary geopolitical realities, one including the addition of Brazil, Germany, Japan, and India, plus two countries from Africa, one from the Arab north and the other from sub-Saharan Africa. On the important issue of use of force, the panel lays down new criteria including the early authorization of intervention for non-imminent threats, *e.g.*, against terrorists who are about to acquire weapons of mass destruction. The panel also recommends that the Security Council has the right to intervene in internal conflicts when a country has abdicated its responsibility to provide security to its own citizens. The panel calls for a doubling of development aid from \$70 million to \$140 billion, the establishment of Peace Building Commission to more effectively address reconstruction in failed states, and a revitalized Human Rights Commission.

Efforts to implement change will be resisted by some members and will require constructive U.S. support. Whether the Bush administration can recognize its country's interests in strengthening the U.N. remains to be seen. What is certain is that in an increasingly complex, globalizing world, a universal body recognized as a source of international authority and legitimacy is indispensable to address the many issues that transcend borders. And bearing in mind the implausible alternative of replacing the U.N., American skeptics must reckon with the specter of one power taking on the U.N.'s responsibilities should the institution catastrophically fail. That "one power" nowadays would be the United States, a prospect that would give pause to even the most imperially minded.

Does the United States need the United Nations? America already benefits directly in a multitude of ways from the U.N. But the depth of U.S. interests in a vibrant multilateralism goes beyond the positive inducements of things like global economic regulation. "Like it or not, other nations hold the U.N. in high esteem and it has become a central pillar of international relations and law," says one American commentator speaking at the Heritage Foundation. "America has a vested interest in making the U.N. work. Otherwise, those problems normally assigned to the U.N. wind up on America's doorstep."¹¹

article footnotes

- ¹ "Fighting for survival," *The Economist*, November 20, 2004, pp. 25-27.
- ² Patrick Brogan, *The Fighting Never Stopped* (London: Vintage Books, 1990), p. vii.
- ³ Jessica Matthews, "Power Shift," *Foreign Affairs*, January-February, 1997, p. 51.
- ⁴ "The World Before Them," *The Interdependent*, Vol. 2. No. 4 (Winter 2004), pp. 20-25.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ That does not include the budgets of the World Bank, IMF, or International Fund for Agricultural Development. For budget data, see < <http://www.un.org/geninfo/ir/ch5/ch5.htm>>.
- ⁸ See John Gerard Ruggie, ed., *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
- ⁹ Ruggie, p. 23.
- ¹⁰ See the Pew global survey, June 2005, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=247>.
- ¹¹ Brett D. Schaeffer, "The UN Requires Fundamental Reforms," Heritage Foundation Lecture No. 842, June 16, 2004. Available online at <http://www.heritage.org>.



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