

The New Bush Administration and the UN: A Strategy of Great Power Consensus?

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While the presidency of George W. Bush is still at an early stage, it is already clear what direction his Secretary of State, Colin Powell, will be trying to pursue in policy toward the United Nations. Powell will be using the UN as a forum for building great-power consensus in order to deal with pressing international security concerns. While this is becoming clear in Bush's policies toward the Balkans, it is paramount in the Bush approach to sanctions against Iraq. What is uncertain, however, is how this UN policy can comfortably coexist with the more confrontational security policies toward Russia followed by other Bush team players.

Background: The Clinton Years

In many ways, Powell's apparent UN strategy builds on that followed by former president Bill Clinton in his second term. In Clinton's first term, US relations with the broader UN community were often strained. US Permanent Representative to the UN Madeleine Albright found herself in a personality conflict with General Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali; the US Senate, operating under the Republican agenda of the Contract with America, was at loggerheads with the UN General Assembly over efficiency and funding issues; and the debacle of US cooperation with the UN peacekeeping mission in Somalia was followed by the failure of the US to intervene to stop the genocide in Rwanda. At the same time, US relations with Russia in the UN Security Council became strained as Russia, under pressure from nationalist opposition at home began to reassert its independent state interests. Russia backed away from the early 1990s tendency to follow along behind the American lead, and the Clinton administration had not been expecting this.

The new Secretary General, Kofi Annan, made a strong effort to reach out to UN critics in the US Senate. As a result, the relationship between the US and the UN began to change. These changes were further strengthened when Richard Holbrooke was confirmed as Clinton's new Permanent Representative to the UN in 1999. Recognizing that US unilateralism was accomplishing little, Holbrooke worked to overcome the international community's perception of US indifference to the UN. When the time came for the US to assume the rotating seat of Security Council president, Holbrooke chose to use the opportunity to focus on crises in Africa, arguing that insufficient US and world attention had earlier been paid to the AIDS epidemic and to conflict resolution in what

many have called Africa's "world war." Holbrooke also worked to reach a lasting compromise on the UN funding standoff between the US Senate and the General Assembly. Furthermore, what had begun as NATO military intervention in Kosovo in the face of strident Russian objections in time turned into successful great power cooperation to overcome the intransigence of Slobodan Milosevic. It was a UN Security Council Chapter VII resolution that ended the war in Kosovo, and despite some initial conflicts over deployments on the ground, success was eventually achieved in realizing Russian cooperation with the UN-authorized KFOR peacekeeping operation.

The Sanctions Crisis

Yet there was one area--sanctions against Iraq--where the Clinton administration failed to maintain great power consensus in the UN, and also failed to accomplish its underlying goals. The goals of the sanctions regime became increasingly unclear with time. What had begun as an effort to force Saddam Hussein to allow intrusive UN inspections of suspected weapons of mass destruction (WMD) sites appeared to become an effort to undermine his regime, and neither effort succeeded. Even though everyone in the UN community knew that Saddam Hussein's corrupt and self-serving policies were largely responsible for the economic hardship faced by the Iraqi people in the 1990s, there is no question that the existence of the sanctions regime contributed to the suffering of innocent Iraqi civilians. One American official argues that it therefore began to look as though the US were "just Iraq's enemy," plain and simple, bent on harming Iraq without any clear idea about what the sanctions were supposed to accomplish. The absence of consensus about the validity of the sanctions contributed to their weakness, since violations became rampant by states supposedly committed to following sanctions rules.

By 2001, the US State Department and new Secretary of State Colin Powell decided that it was time to clarify US goals and revamp the sanctions regime to make it more clearly serve US interests. The goal now is to retarget sanctions toward the more limited aim of curtailing Saddam Hussein's ability to acquire and develop WMD and missile technology. An even higher priority of the new administration is to rebuild the international consensus that Saddam Hussein is a dangerous actor who threatens Middle East stability and peace. In other words, Powell recognizes that while sanctions may not be able to completely stop the flow of resources into Iraq's military machine, they can serve as a useful symbol of unity in the international community, signifying the shared belief that Saddam Hussein has bad intentions.

It is too early to know if Powell will be successful in this effort. Distrust of the United States runs deep in the international community at present, where Russia, China, and France are all suspicious of US unilateralism. This distrust was heightened by US and British bombing of Iraqi air defense systems outside of the no-fly zones in February 2001, especially since the no-fly zones were unilaterally imposed on Iraq by the US and the UK alone. The State Department's strategy is also hampered by a lack of consensus in both the Bush administration and the US Senate about how policy toward Iraq should look.

Nonetheless, the sanctions redesign effort is being helped by the Bush administration's actions on other UN security issues. In March 2001, US peacekeepers on the ground in Kosovo began to take a harsher stance toward Albanian rebels who attacked Serbs, in an effort to emphasize US impartiality. The US simultaneously supported a Security Council statement condemning violence by Albanian separatists. This was only possible because of the emergence of the new democratic regime in Yugoslavia: the US and Russia most likely could never have reached consensus on dealing with Milosevic. Yet it was clear that in large part the new US policy was designed to help the great powers once again work together to contain a conflict that threatened the peace in Serbia and Macedonia.

Realism Reemerges

What this indicates is that Powell is choosing UN strategies based on a realistic understanding of the balance of power in the international system, and on the recognition that states in the UN system will follow their own interests. Gone is the belief that the world will automatically recognize the US as a benign and well-intentioned hegemon. For the US to succeed in managing certain pressing threats to international security, it must gain the cooperation of states whose interests do not match its own. Therefore, the US must seek ways to engage other great powers with regard to specific and limited shared interests--rather than blindly assuming the existence of uniformly shared goals, and then undergoing repeated disappointment when harmony does not materialize.

In this sense, the Bush administration is using the United Nations in the way that great powers in the past have successfully used cooperative fora in the international system: not with the idealistic belief that international organizations can eliminate competing interests, but instead with the realistic hope that UN structures can be used to unearth a few common interests around which a limited consensus can be built.

Yet this limited consensus on UN policy may be threatened by disunity within the Bush administration. Certainly the more confrontational statements about Russian proliferation that have been made by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the diplomatic expulsion spy scandal of March 2001 throw into doubt the prospects for Russian cooperation with the US inside the UN Security Council. Moreover, the most unpredictable wild card in this equation is Bush's relationship with the Christian right in the US. It damaged US credibility in the UN system when Bush returned to the Reagan-era policy of withdrawing all foreign aid from international agencies that support abortion rights. This was followed by the proposal to replace direct American overseas development assistance with subsidies to domestic nongovernmental organizations and religious groups, who would deliver the international aid instead. What was left largely unspoken is that religious groups often give aid with proselytism attached--a situation that can be offensive to states without a Christian tradition. Both of these trends constitute jarring exceptions to the realism of Powell's other foreign policy moves, and may serve to undermine the consensus that Bush is otherwise working to create.

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