

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE UN IN THE CHANGED GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

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The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington have changed the course of world history. These attacks, which were attributed to Al-Qaeda, a secretive Islamic group led by Usama Bin Laden, shook the world's sole Super Power, the USA, to the core. Its pride was hurt and its sense of security badly shaken. To take revenge, the powerful neo-conservative lobby in the US influenced President George W. Bush to launch a global war against terrorism. It is notable that nearly all countries of the world shared the sense of outrage and concern felt by the US at 9/11 and were at least initially, supportive of the declared US goal of a global war against terrorism.

Since 9/11, the US has embarked on two major military operations. Firstly, the refusal of the xenophobic Taliban regime in Afghanistan to hand over Usama Bin Laden resulted in the US-led attack on Afghanistan in October 2001. The UN gave its blessings to the US action and even the majority of governments in the Islamic world extended support to the US in this war. At the same time, there were deep misgivings all over the world about the very idea of a forcible change of any regime – even one as unpopular internationally as that of the Taliban -- and the use of force by a Super Power against a small and relatively powerless country. In the Islamic world, despite support of their governments for the US action, public opinion was angered by what was seen as the destruction of a Muslim state. Besides, some circles in the Islamic countries saw the US action against Afghanistan as the manifestation of a historical animus against the Islamic world. This revived talk about a new crusade against Islam and a clash of civilizations.

The wounds in the Islamic world had not quite healed when, in March 2003, the US-UK coalition attacked Iraq. Unlike the case of Afghanistan, the US-led invasion of Iraq was undertaken in defiance of world opinion. No doubt, the US tried initially to secure

UN support for the attack on Iraq, but having failed in that objective, it decided to bypass the Security Council. In particular, Arab and Muslim opinion was outraged by the US attack on Iraq, although it should be noted that some Arab states, as also Turkey, did provide military facilities to the US during the war. Of course, the opposition to the Iraq war was worldwide and there were large demonstrations against it in the Western world itself. In particular, France, Germany and Russia were highly critical of the US attack. The NATO alliance was deeply split on the issue.

Prior to the attack, the US had asserted its right to take unilateral action where it deemed it to be in its national interest. In his report to the US Congress on September 20, 2002, President Bush announced a strategy for pre-emptive action against "hostile states" and terrorist groups alleged to be developing weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, he said that the US would not allow its military supremacy to be challenged in the way it was during the Cold War¹. In a sweeping blueprint for global supremacy, President Bush made it clear that the US would not allow any rival power to challenge its military might; would launch pre-emptive military strikes against security threats even when they were not imminent; and would not shrink from compelling others to fall in line. The three notable features of the Bush Doctrine can also be described as follows: a "distinctly American internationalism" based on uncontested military superiority; unilateralism as against multilateralism; and pre-emptive strikes against hostile regimes or those that sponsor terrorism². In particular, the US has decided to target countries possessing -- or suspected by it to be possessing -- weapons of mass destruction. This concept of unilateralism and pre-emption, which really constitutes the Bush Doctrine, has caused concern all over the world.

While the Bush Doctrine has attracted worldwide attention, and is seen as a direct response to 9/11, in actual fact, the doctrine of pre-emption and first-strike has been advocated by US policy-makers ever since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. The present US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz had espoused this concept as early as 1991 in a report prepared for the Pentagon. He had predicted that US military intervention would

become “a constant feature” of world affairs. The US would “retain pre-eminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs that threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends.” This included a first-strike option or “pre-emption” against potentially hostile states engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction³.

According to another American strategist, Charles Krauthammer, “the true geopolitical structure of the post-Cold War world is that of a single pole of world power that consists of the United States at the apex of the industrial west... American preeminence is based on the fact that it is the only country with the military, diplomatic, political and economic assets to be a decisive player in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses to involve itself⁴.” Philip Bobbitt, whose book *The Shield of Achilles* (2002) summarizes current US strategic thinking, states that the advocates of this particular US school of thought which includes Krauthammer hold that even collective security schemes like NATO are “little more than a psychological fig leaf for the robust American assertion of power (and thus reserve a special contempt for the U.N.)⁵.”

Note needs to be taken of another important dimension of the nature of global warfare, brought out in particular by 9/11. The terrorists who attacked New York and Washington brought to the fore the role increasingly being played by non-state actors in global politics. While terrorists -- working in isolation, or with some degree of support from one or more states -- have been around for quite some time, this issue has been dramatized by 9/11, as it affected the vital interests of the world’s sole Super Power. Thus, terrorism by individuals or by small groups has emerged as a key global issue.

According to Bobbitt, in the 21st century, the great powers will repeatedly face five questions regarding the use of force: “whether to intervene, when to do so, with what allies, with what military and nonmilitary tools, and for what goals⁶.” Apart from outright war, Bobbitt suggests several possible nonmilitary strategic alternatives viz. “economic sanctions, covert action, bribes and financial incentives, sustained campaigns of precision air strikes,

novel military and political uses of intelligence products, information warfare, missile defense, simulation, the use of proxy forces, and the entire range of new technologies and tactics⁷.”

The above account suggests that many US strategists have been considering new strategies to meet the challenges to the US in the 21st century. However, 9/11 has clearly influenced Washington's decision to adopt the concept of preemption and unilateralism, which have become official policy with the announcement of the Bush Doctrine.

Against this background, it can be said that the post-9/11 world is quite different from the world that existed prior to that date. In particular, the US attack on Iraq was a defiant assertion of unilateralism and its sole Super Power status. Many analysts fear that this has gravely damaged the credibility of the UN and the whole concept of collective security on which it was based. The existing system of international legality has taken a body blow. There are fears that the US has set a bad precedent and that lesser powers might take this as a cue to launch their own pre-emptive strikes against smaller neighbors. Indeed, the world had hoped that the 21st century would have heralded a just world order based on enhanced collective security enshrined in the UN Charter. These prospects had been boosted in 1991 by the end of the Cold War and the fifty-year old East-West confrontation. Instead, the Iraq War of 2003 looks to some observers like a grave retrogression to the law of the jungle of the previous centuries.

While the foregoing apprehensions are not unfounded, there could be an excess of pessimism in such judgments. Firstly, a closer examination of the historical record shows that the US is not the first country to bypass the UN while resorting to unilateral military action. The UN has been bypassed repeatedly by many countries in the last fifty years. North Korea attacked South Korea in 1950 without a UN mandate. Israel attacked the Arabs in 1956 and 1967 without UN authorization, as did Egypt in 1973 when it launched its own attack on Israel. India attacked Pakistan in 1965; Iraq attacked Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990 without any notice to the UN or anyone else. The former Soviet Union launched military invasions

against Hungary in 1956, against Czechoslovakia in 1968 and against Afghanistan in 1979 without any UN cover. The UN and the international community condemned most of these attacks, but only in the case of Korea in 1950 and Iraq in 1990, the UN was able to organize a collective response.

Secondly, it can be said that while each such unilateral use of force weakened the standing of the UN, it did survive and even bounced back. This is because the world needs a central body like the UN and keeps coming back to this forum despite reverses.

Clearly, the UN has often not been able to deliver on the promises made in 1945 when this body was set up in the flush of victory against three of the most dangerous expansionist, totalitarian states – Germany, Italy and Japan. As it turned out, the hopes for a brave new world were soon dashed to the ground as the Cold War between the East and the West paralyzed the UN. For the first thirty years or so, the repeated use of Soviet veto rendered the UN Security Council more or less ineffective. The premise of the UN Charter was that the five Great Powers would act in unison on key issues. This did not happen almost from the very start because of the great chasm that developed between the US and the Soviet Union. Only rarely when Washington and Moscow were in agreement, e.g. in opposition to Israel's attack on Egypt in 1956 and stopping the Indo-Pakistan War in 1965, did the UN surface as a credible body for peace-making. For the rest, the use of veto, or the threat of its use, often prevented the Security Council from playing an effective role to maintain peace in the world. Thus, for instance, ever since 1957, the Kashmir dispute was left in limbo due to the Soviet veto.

The end of the Cold War raised hopes for a more concerted action by the UN and the emergence of a new world order. The UN did put up a united front in 1990 to force Iraq to vacate its aggression against Kuwait. But this unity could not be maintained in the case of the crisis in Bosnia and Kosovo in the latter part of the 1990's. Russian (as also Chinese) support for Yugoslavia again paralyzed the UN Security Council. Eventually, the US-led military action against Yugoslavia was taken under the umbrella of NATO. The UN was again bypassed. However, it should be recalled that the

US was supported by the Islamic world and many other countries in the liberation of Kosovo.

The foregoing record suggests that, on several occasions, many countries have bypassed the UN, including the US. However, the UN has continued to survive and has even been resurrected after many a crisis. In fact, a question could be asked as to why there has been such an outcry when the US resorted to unilateral military action against Iraq in March 2003? One answer could be that the US had itself been a great advocate of the concept of collective security and reliance on the UN. It had never before resorted to war in the teeth of such opposition from the majority of world opinion. The reversal of the US attitude has, therefore, caused greater dismay. Another answer could be that the international community is uncomfortable with the idea of a sole Super Power seeking to run the world according to its whims. By raising such an outcry over the bypassing of the UN in the Iraq War, the world community sent a clear message to the US that it must not ignore world opinion and resort to unilateralism. The US policy-makers cannot but be disturbed by the growing anti-Americanism in the world unleashed by the Iraq War. This cannot be in the long-term strategic interests even of the world's sole Super Power.

Moreover, it needs to be said that although the US, in the final resort, did bypass the UN in the recent Iraq crisis, and has been condemned for the same, it did seek to carry the UN with it for the greater part of the crisis. The US attitude towards the UN in the Iraqi crisis has not been one of defiance. Had that happened, the credibility of the UN would have been damaged far more. In fact, the US has argued that UN Security Council Resolution 1441 had held Iraq guilty of "material breach" of its obligations stretching back over 16 previous UN Resolutions in 12 years. Moreover, Resolution 1441 gave Iraq one last chance to come into compliance or "face serious consequences." The US has contended that "serious consequences" meant the use of force, and thus its military action against Iraq carried UN sanction. Of course, most countries have not accepted the US interpretation but it would be an exaggeration to say that the US acted in total defiance of the Security Council.

To some extent, it can be argued that in the case of Iraq, the US has since been forced to partially revise its previous policy of bypassing the UN. The US did manage to topple the Saddam regime quickly in the military campaign but has since run into serious difficulties in winning the elusive peace in that country. The US has thus gone back to the UN to secure wider international support for its handling of post-war Iraq. Indeed, if the current resistance to US military occupation of Iraq continues, Washington might find it expedient to use the "fig leaf" of the UN to extricate itself from that country. Washington might well have learned a lesson from the Iraq War about the limits of unilateralism. Similarly, the UN has played an important role in the developments in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban period. Both instances show the continued relevance of the UN.

While judging the effectiveness of the UN, it needs to be recognized that the world body basically reflects the unity or disunity in the international community. Where there is cooperation, the UN institutions have done well enough, e.g. in the non-political spheres, as shown by the good work done by WHO, UNESCO, ILO, the World Court, etc. However, in the political arena, which is the domain of the UN Security Council, particularly on the key issue of peacekeeping, the UN has rarely been a success story throughout its existence. But the relative ineffectiveness of the UN did not destroy the premise on which it was based. The UN has always had the capability of becoming functional the moment the veto-wielding countries could reach a consensus amongst themselves. In any event, whether the UN is effective or not, it is also clear that the world would be far worse off if there were no UN. There is always a need for a forum where the countries of the world can sit down together to put forward their respective point of views on various issues. Even in the event of disagreement between any two countries, the protagonists would still like to project their point of view to other countries and canvass for support. The UN provides and will remain an institutionalized forum for this purpose.

Finally, a few words about the implications for Pakistan of the effectiveness of the UN in the changed global environment. No doubt, Pakistan's security concerns have been aggravated by the

damage done to the UN by the Iraq War and the US inclination to act unilaterally. This could encourage regional bullies like India to become even more defiant and aggressive in handling their neighbors. It is clearly in Pakistan's interest to join all those who are opposed to unilateralism and the bypassing of the UN. Pakistan should be even more insistent on strengthening international cooperation -- not only at the UN but also at various global and regional levels, whether it is the OIC or SAARC or NAM. This is one aspect of the equation.

The other aspect is that Pakistan cannot ignore the existing international realities, among which the most important one is the sole Super Power status of the USA and its propensity to act unilaterally. The strategic doctrine of Pakistan has throughout been that it faces a mortal threat from its neighbor India. Accordingly, the worst scenario from the point of view of Pakistan's security would be if the US were to make a common front with India against Pakistan. It is clear that India has sought since 9/11 to cash in on the US obsession with (Islamic) terrorism to get Pakistan bracketed as a state breeding and abetting terrorism. The presence of fanatical Islamic groups in Pakistan could give some credibility to Indian accusations. Also, there has been growing anti-Americanism in Pakistan and a great deal of emotional talk. This could also help India. To prevent a deterioration of relations with Washington, Pakistan must maintain its credentials as a progressive, moderate Islamic state. In fact, extremism has become a cancer in Pakistani society and needs to be eliminated in our own national interest. Towards this end, we must, on the one hand, act decisively to curb terrorism and extremism in Pakistan and elsewhere. On the other hand, Pakistan must continue to make the US realize that a lasting solution to the problem of terrorism lies in removing the causes that nourish terrorist activities, viz. the injustice done to Muslim peoples in Palestine, Kashmir and elsewhere.

End Notes

1. Peter Beaumont, *DAWN*, September 23, 2002
2. Afzaal Mahmood, *DAWN*, September 28, 2002.

3. Carol Brightman, *DAWN*, September. 27, 2002
4. *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1991) pp. 23, 24, 27.
5. Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles*, p. 270
6. Philip Bobbitt, *ibid*, p. 338
7. *Ibid*, p. 318

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