
After Iraq: U.S.-UN Relations

MARK MALLOCH BROWN

I am thrilled to be here today at The Fletcher School, an institution with which the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has good links, as demonstrated by the fact that so many of your alumni hold critical roles within UNDP today. Indeed, what is particularly attractive to us is that this school has an international student body, and it gives us an opportunity to find people who reflect the diversity of our organization—which works in 166 countries—both in the country representation of its staff and in our effort to keep a gender-balanced work force. That means that we are always pushing to find people who combine the kind of training and skills in international affairs and development that schools like this represent, and who bring to my organization a past experience and a passion about development, often from the lives they led before reaching a school such as this.

Now, the subject of what I wanted to talk about today—U.S.-UN relations after Iraq—is obviously a rather complicated one, but let me start with what I think are some of the overly simplistic observations.

The first is that, quite contrary to the postmortems in the media at the time, the UN did not have a bad war in Iraq. From a personal perspective, it was a tragic war, because so many Iraqis died and we lost some of our closest friends and staff when our offices were bombed in Baghdad. But in terms of the position the UN took, I think we did not have such a bad war. Let me explain why.

As the weeks and months go by, and there are no signs of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), we see this as something of a vindication of the weapons inspection process. Even though it is becoming evident that while Saddam

[Q]uite contrary to the postmortems in the media at the time, the UN did not have a bad war in Iraq.

Mark Malloch Brown has served as the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) since July 1999. In May 2003, UN Secretary-General Annan appointed him to a second four-year term. He is noted for integrating the United Nations development perspective into the Bretton Woods institutions, including the incorporation of the Millennium Development Goals. Before joining UNDP he served as vice-president for External Affairs at the World Bank as well as vice-president for United Nations Affairs.

Hussein would have loved to have rebuilt his weapons program after the 1991 Gulf War, he had neither the human capacities left in place, nor the internal authority within the regime, to get it done.

Many of the payments he made to scientists to develop weapons systems appear to have gone straight out of the country and into overseas bank accounts. He was increasingly detached from government. So while the U.S., the UK, and their coalition partners were undoubtedly right about Saddam Hussein's intentions, what we suspected from our inspection work was the case: he had been unable to reconstruct such a program.

Second, I think that the UN did not have as bad a war as has often been cited because a critical deterrent in preventing Saddam Hussein from reconstructing WMD was the presence of weapons inspectors. It had the intended effect of disrupting supply arrangements, testing arrangements, and building and develop-

*[N]ot just in the U.S.,
but all around the world,
people followed news of
what was happening in
the Security Council.*

ment planning, so it was a kind of victory for inspections. When inspections are grounded in a good understanding of the technologies one needs to build particular kinds of weapons, and where those technologies are available and supported by good intelligence work, the process seems to work as a means of inhibiting weapons production. In addition, it was certainly not a bad war in the sense of the Security Council becoming the

world's best-known small room. On television screens and in the newspapers for weeks and months, not just in the U.S., but all around the world, people followed news of what was happening in the Security Council. Despite the airless little place that it is, the Security Council certainly has its moments of high drama.

I think the fourth reason we did not have such a bad war was that, even as disagreements surfaced on Iraq, the UN was quite outspoken and consistent with the direction from the majority in the Security Council regarding our concerns on how a war was being undertaken, while reaffirming again that we considered Saddam Hussein a menace to his own people and to the world. Within those parameters, which we stated clearly and repeatedly, it was nevertheless clear that what characterized those months was as much cooperation and collaboration as confrontation.

In the immediate post-conflict period, as we had all expected and as the U.S. immediately recognized, the critical provision of basic services—most notably the food rations on which the majority of Iraqis depended, but also the restoration of drinking water, electricity, and basic hospital supplies—were delivered principally by the UN system and nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners. It may have been a little unclear in the press coverage, but the fact is

that, from very early on, the U.S. was heavily dependent on UN humanitarian support to meet the basic needs of the Iraqi people.

Through all the vicissitudes of what has happened since, that basic dependence on the UN partnership at critical key moments in Iraq has been very evident. The deadlock over a political transition in Iraq, whether via caucuses or elections, led to UN special envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, going to Baghdad to meet with the influential Ayatollah Sistani, who would not meet with any U.S. representative. It was during that long meeting that Mr. Brahimi was able to negotiate a postponement in elections. So, fundamentally, I think it is clear that the kind of complete break of relations between the U.S. and the UN, which was portrayed in many parts of the media, was in a sense distorted.

BEYOND IRAQ

But much more important in a way for the quality of U.S.-UN relations is what is happening away from Iraq. As the U.S. adjusts to the post-9/11 world and the degree of vulnerability it feels in that strategic environment, we see the U.S. increasingly relying on multilateralism to carry out key tasks that are beyond its own direct bilateral power to achieve.

Whether it is in other post-conflict situations such as Liberia, where the U.S. worked with the UN and the World Bank to organize an international conference in February to fund Liberia's reconstruction; or on the issue of public health challenges such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, or avian flu, where the U.S. works through the remarkable Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, but which needs the legitimacy and distribution system of the World Health Organization to effectively respond to global health problems; or whether it is the growing issue of migration and UN efforts to try and begin to develop a new global political consensus around the boundaries and appropriate immigration regimes in a globalized world, where everything else is allowed to move across borders except, it seems, people, the same question arises: How are we going to handle this in a sensible, global way? It is clear that the answer in part is that these are all global issues where the U.S. and the UN have worked well together and should continue to do so.

Indeed, in today's debates on relations between the U.S. and the UN, the role the U.S. has played throughout the history of the UN is all too easily overlooked. It was people from the U.S.—politicians and civil society leaders—who, both through the League of Nations and, most strikingly, at the San Francisco

[F]rom very early on, the U.S. was heavily dependent on UN humanitarian support to meet the basic needs of the Iraqi people.

Conference in 1945, helped found the UN and provided so much of the qualitative input and discussion that makes the UN what it is today. It is really remarkable. I would recommend to you *The Act of Creation*, a book published last year by Steven Schlesinger about the founding of the UN in San Francisco. It strikingly brings out the involvement of a huge array of U.S. NGOs and business groups that went to San Francisco to lobby the delegations, demanding that there be a strong commitment to human rights in the Charter and immediate follow-up action to create the covenants on human rights. They also demanded that the Security Council role of the UN be balanced with both an economic and social element.

WHERE NEXT?

Looking ahead, I would finally like to turn to where we go now in this relationship, because I think we are at a key moment. It is likely that this year's presidential election will be a foreign policy election, perhaps to the most significant extent since 1968. Issues of national security and how this is best achieved in a

It is likely that this year's presidential election will be a foreign policy election, perhaps to the most significant extent since 1968.

globalized world are already being raised, with arguments set around a vision of security that stresses attention to economic and social problems in the world—particularly to inequality and poverty—and how that intersects with the military dimension. Regardless of who is president next year, I think we will see a political system more aligned behind addressing some of the global issues and, almost certainly, the burden-sharing it entails and the partner-

ships it requires, one which looks to the UN and to the international financial institutions as a principal vehicle for these discussions.

Perhaps more broadly, we now also have the possibility of a time in history, not unlike the San Francisco moment of 1945, which essentially was a global deal on both security arrangements in a postwar world and achieving economic development. The post-World War II settlement allowed the victors dominance of the Security Council through the veto. But, it promised the losers—and more particularly, those who were neutral in the war or had been on the Allies' side but not actively involved—a say through the other institutions of the UN and the promise of a world order run broadly in the interests of democracy and market capitalism.

For the UN itself, this is undeniably a time of major self-examination. A high-level panel established by UN Secretary-General Annan last autumn is examining the threats and challenges we face to global security today, and how

the international community can best respond to ensure that effective joint action is possible in a unipolar world. As they look at these issues, my hope is that they will acknowledge the fact that for the majority of the world's population, the main security threats are often far closer to home. Continuing extreme poverty, which sees more than a quarter of the world living on less than two dollars a day, the HIV/AIDS pandemic that infected more than five million people in 2003, and the environmental degradation that causes the loss of forests and livelihoods and declining access to clean water, all brutally affect the lives of millions of people everyday in the developing world.

All of these human security issues will come together next year. First, at the 2005 Heads of Government summit, the UN will review progress on the targets that world leaders unanimously agreed on in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These include the overarching aim of halving extreme poverty and hunger by 2015, as well as seeing every boy and girl in school, and halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious disease by the same date. That five-year review will have followed a real effort through a number of European Union (EU) presidencies to push for completion of this development agenda, which will culminate with the British presidencies of both the Group of Eight and the EU just before the summit.

For the UN itself, this is undeniably a time of major self-examination.

We will have the possibility of making the 2005 summit very different from earlier summits. As a result of innovative work being undertaken by UNDP's Millennium Project, which is working with developing countries and other partners to formulate the best strategies for achieving the MDGs, there will be real action plans built from the country level up that can contribute to a carefully budgeted and road-mapped agenda for meeting the goals.

If we get there on both of these aspects, I believe we can put this century on a very different trajectory. It could—and I would argue, should—also be a dramatic shot in the arm for international institutions such as the UN. Not necessarily as the major vehicle for transfer for such development assistance but, as an institution whose authority is the expression of such a global deal, the UN could see a renewed legitimacy—a San Francisco II if you like—in terms of putting authority back behind the multilateral system so that it is better equipped to meet the kinds of challenges I outlined above.

For both the U.S. and the UN, I hope we can look forward to an exciting future where we can work together to achieve our common goals of building a safer, more secure world for all.

Thank you. ■

