

A U.N. Alternative to War: “Uniting for Peace”

In the last few months, the Bush Administration has been unyielding in its march towards war, over the objections of some allies and despite the efforts of the United Nations. In response to France’s threat that it would veto efforts by the United States to obtain a U.N. resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq, President Bush said the United States would lead a “coalition of the willing to disarm Saddam Hussein.” Prime Minister Tony Blair stated that the United States and Britain reserved the right to use force against Iraq--- even if a Security Council member vetoed a resolution authorizing the use of force. It now seems obvious that the United States, with some other countries, may soon go to war despite a veto; or, alternatively, go to war without returning to the Security Council and risking a veto. But for people around the world terrified that a new war in Iraq is inevitable, there may yet be hope. And that hope lies in a little-discussed mechanism of the United Nations itself—which, although it seems marginalized by American power, has the potential to stop the war.

The Charter gives the Security Council “the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.” But the Security Council is currently unable to carry out this responsibility in light of U.S. plans to attack Iraq. The Council is stymied: The United States may bypass the Council entirely. And, if the Council tries to obtain passage of a resolution prohibiting the United States from using unauthorized force against Iraq, the United States or Britain will surely veto it.

Long ago, the members of the United Nations recognized that such impasses would occur in the Security Council. They set up a procedure for insuring that such stalemates would not prevent the United Nations from carrying out its mission to “maintain international peace and security.” In 1950, the United Nations by an almost unanimous vote adopted Resolution 377, the wonderfully named “Uniting for Peace.” The United States played an important role in that resolution’s adoption, concerned about the possibilities of vetoes by the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Uniting for Peace provides that if, because of the lack of unanimity of the permanent members of the Security Council (France, China, Russia, Britain, United States), the Council cannot maintain international peace where there is a “threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression,” the General Assembly “shall consider the matter immediately....” The General Assembly can meet within 24 hours to consider such a matter, and can recommend collective measures to U.N. members including the use of armed forces to “maintain or restore international peace and security.”

The Uniting for Peace resolution procedure has been used ten times since 1950. Its first use was by the United States. After Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 Britain and France attacked and occupied parts of the canal. Cease-fire resolutions in the Security Council were quickly vetoed by Britain and France. The United States went to the General Assembly calling for a cease-fire and a withdrawal of forces. An emergency session was held under the “Uniting for Peace” resolution; the U.S. resolution and subsequently an even stronger resolution passed the General Assembly. In the face of these resolutions it took less than a week for Britain and France to withdraw.

Uniting for Peace was next used by the United States to pressure the Soviet Union to cease its intervention in Hungary in 1956. The Soviet Union had used its veto to prevent the passage of an anti-intervention resolution in the Security Council. Again, an emergency session of the General Assembly was held and the Soviet Union was ordered to stop its intervention in Hungary.

In the current impasse over Iraq in the Security Council, Uniting for Peace can and should be used. The General Assembly should consider taking action with regard to the threat to the peace posed by U.S. military action against Iraq taken without U.N. authority. It could require that no military action be taken against Iraq without the explicit authority of the Security Council. It could mandate that the inspection regime be permitted to complete its inspections. It seems unlikely that the United States and Britain would ignore such a measure. A vote by the majority of countries in the world, particularly if it were almost unanimous, would make the unilateral rush to war more difficult.

Uniting for Peace can be invoked either by seven members of the Security Council or by a majority of the members of the General Assembly. This gives those who oppose unilateral war a real opportunity for activism. People everywhere in the world can lobby their governments to bring on such a resolution. This effort can become a worldwide effort to, as the UN Charter so eloquently states, “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

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