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A Chance to Reshape the U.N.

By turning back to the United Nations now, in the moment of victory in Iraq, President Bush can seize a historic opportunity to pioneer a tough-minded and enduring form of multilateralism. He can commit the United States to leading the world rather than defying it, and he can do so at a time when this country is in a good position to seek new rules and procedures for making the United Nations a more effective protector of international order.

The administration is right to see that the institutions of the post-World War II era aren't yet adapted to address the threats of the post-Cold War era. The answer, however, is not to destroy those institutions but rather to reform them. The United States must work with other permanent members of the Security Council to ensure that the next security crisis -- perhaps North Korea -- does not end like the last one. That requires compromise on all sides. But above all, it requires redrawing the lines of how the Security Council defines which threats to international security are sufficient to require the use of force.

The conventional wisdom is that the United Nations can never countenance regime change. Yet the administration is convinced, not without reason, that in some extreme cases only regime change can achieve the goals of human security and national security. Unless it's possible to make this case in the Security Council itself, the United States will either ignore the council or be doomed to hypocrisy when it goes before it, making arguments that fellow U.N. members and the world at large will not believe reflect its true motives.

How would this new approach work in practice? By finally linking the human rights side of the United Nations with the security side. In other words by formally linking the kind of moral arguments presented against Saddam Hussein -- arguments that the United States made outside the Security Council -- with the kind of arguments for disarmament that it made inside the council.

An enormous and important amount of U.N. machinery is devoted to propagating and enforcing human rights law, holding governments to account for torturing, murdering, "disappearing" and otherwise oppressing their own people. At the same time, another part of that machinery is devoted to trying to regulate the use of armed force. Yet the very origins of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reflect at least in part the recognition that Hitler's horrific abuses of his own people foreshadowed the threat he posed to the rest of the world.

Suppose the Security Council were to adopt a resolution recognizing that the following set of conditions would constitute a threat to the peace sufficient to justify the use of force: 1) possession of weapons of mass destruction or clear and convincing evidence of attempts to gain such weapons; 2) grave and systematic human rights abuses sufficient to demonstrate the

absence of any internal constraints on government behavior; and 3) evidence of aggressive intent with regard to other nations. This cluster sets a very high threshold for the use of force, but it also acknowledges that in a world in which a terrorist possessing a weapon of mass destruction could kill hundreds of thousands or even millions of people, a government's business may more readily become the Security Council's business.

Why would other nations agree? Because in the end all nations are stronger and safer with the existence of what President Bush has referred to as robust international institutions -- institutions that have both the political will and the means to enforce their mandates. Because although al Qaeda may be shrewd enough to keep targeting the United States so as to widen the disparity between the threat this country perceives and what the rest of the world perceives, a dirty bomb or a nuclear weapon in New York would in fact kill citizens from most of the world's nations and deal a savage blow to the world economy. And finally because the United Nations is the only forum in which other nations can make their voices heard in deliberations with the United States. It is the forum in which a genuine multilateral decision-making process must take place.

The decision to go to war in Iraq without a second Security Council resolution need not have provoked the crisis it did in U.S.-European Union relations. Indeed, the French ambassador to the United States has now publicly admitted that in the weeks leading up to the U.S.-British decision to table the second resolution, he went to the State Department and the White House to urge us not to seek a second resolution but rather to "agree to disagree between gentlemen, as we did on Kosovo." But tactical mistakes and growing mistrust on both sides created a rift that now risks a continuing political standoff, even in the face of a military victory.

With anti-Americanism mounting ever higher among European publics, as well as in the Middle East and around the world, the United States must return to the United Nations to win the peace. But instead of seeking to restore the status quo, we should reinvent it. We have a chance to reach out to other nations to strengthen and equip the United Nations to meet a new generation of global challenges. If we miss this chance, we and the world have a frightening amount to lose.