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Le Centre Français sur les Etats-Unis (CFE)

The United States and the United Nations in the Post Cold War Era

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Synopsis

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Importance of multilateral institutions, but also of bilateral relations, both outside and within those institutions. Both the issues of multilateralism and bilateralism will therefore be addressed.

The period before the attacks of September 11 witnessed a questioning both within and outside the United States of the stance of the Bush administration in terms of its approach towards multilateralism on general. In the aftermath of the tragic events of September, it is not yet clear how many things have changed.

What is certain however, is the transformation in the mentality of the average American. They no longer take for granted safe travelling, safe buildings, or safe mail. It is the first time that the average American is aware that he is directly at risk. The public is now directly engaged. This can also be perceived through the heightened sense of patriotism, which can be perceived for instance in the number of flags which can be seen on every window around the country.

Priorities also appear to have shifted. Americans now spend more time with their families and at church. They are reflecting on who they are, what they represent, and how they are going to act.

In a recent address, as quoted in an American newspaper, Hubert Védrine stated that « there is no rallying by the United States to the cause of multilateralism ». This statement is however too definite. For indeed, to begin with, the « M » word is now being used, whereas it was never used by Bush during his presidential campaign. There have been moreover important developments in American policy and attitudes towards multilateralism. In the coming years, we may thus expect perhaps not a clear shift towards multilateralism, but a shift away from « multilaterally tinged unilateralism » to « unilaterally tinged multilateralism ». We are already

beginning to move substantially towards greater multilateralism, which will take many forms, but which can already be perceived in the area of fight against terrorism. At the same time, the United States is clearly favorable to the action of the United Nations, in particular in the field of humanitarian action, this being a clear sign of American multilateral engagement. This is to be witnessed since Sept 11 through Resolution 1371, which from this point of view can be perceived to be historic, with its very strong follow up mechanism for fighting terrorism.

American multilateral engagement can also be perceived through the US appeal to NATO in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, although this may widely be perceived as being largely symbolic.

But perhaps the most interesting proof of the US's desire for multilateral engagement may come via a wide range of ad hoc arrangements for specific areas, such as the proliferation of biological weapons or the financing of terrorist networks. Given this, there is a clear need for a reappraisal of the institutional network, but within and outside the UN.

The American approach towards terrorism, and its desire for greater multilateral engagement, may carry over on to some issues, but not others. Some examples :

Missile defense. This is widely considered outside the US as representing the heart and soul of American unilateralism. Yet engagement with Russia on this issue is both intense and fruitful. « Non-proliferation ». Congress has not ratified CTBT which has not been proposed for resubmission, yet the US plans to abide by it nevertheless.

Biological weapons protocol. Congress was standoffish about ratifying it before Sept 11 ; there is now a change of course, the US now planning to put forward a plan for multilateral engagement on the issue.

IAEA. The United States is at the same time calling for a stronger role for this multilateral organization.

Climate change. Here however, there will probably be no change.

International Court of Justice. There will probably be no change here either, not many backers in either the administration or among either parties in Congress.

Peacekeeping in the Balkans. There is no longer a desire for the US to come home. This is an important shift in policy.

Money for peacekeeping. In most of the United States, peacekeeping money has been paid, the only exception for the moment being Sierra Leone. This underlines the fact that the US is now determined to pay, with this issue being strongly supported by Powell.

The issue of American arrears to the UN can be considered to be a model, as shown in the way in which in Washington, a bipartisan consensus was knitted together in favor of a deal on UN dues, and this before the September attacks.

Conclusion : Alexis de Tocqueville « For democratic nations to be happy and prosperous, they only need to will it ». We must however will it together.

Symbolism of the statue of liberty, symbol of hope for the American nation.

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There has been no real change in the American attitude towards the United Nations, constant policy from the beginning. The attacks of September 11 have brought no real change. This is due to the unique position which the United States have enjoyed since the end of the Second World War. The United Nations indeed needs the United States much more than the US needs the UN, which is not the case for the rest of the international community. Though to be fair,

any country in such a situation would in all likelihood behave in the same manner as the United States does.

It is the Bush administration which perhaps most of all made good use of the United Nations in the Gulf War, via Resolution 678, thanks to which the US was able to use the UN as a legitimizing factor in the coalition. It was also useful in getting the necessary support from Congress.

The Clinton administration had a very open approach to the United Nations, though member countries were still compelled to take on board the goals of the United States as their own, for sake of the system. Also, still opportunistic use of the Security Council, as seen for the Middle East process, which the US is saying is not an issue which the SC should be dealing with.

We will consider two issues, terrorism and Afghanistan.

1. Terrorism. Two very important resolutions, Res 1368 and Res 1373, both very much coalition building. They offer states an excellent legal background for acting, either unilaterally or multilaterally. Yet here, it can be seen that the United States are not insisting on serious follow up mechanisms, as opposed to the French, with this testifying to the fact that they are not really serious about multilateral engagement. They simply want a traditional “sanction committee”, with states simply reporting on the actions which they have taken, no substantial cooperation.
2. Afghanistan. No resolution has been voted since September 11. No substantive change on the US approach to the UN, still very pragmatic approach. The US can be seen as wanting to reduce all its contributions to multilateral institutions, while at the same time still claiming the leading role in them.

Alexandra Novosseloff

DAS.

The United States may not be considered as taking multilateralism seriously. Prior to the September attacks, it lost its seat on the Human Rights Commission, it put forward as a condition to the payment of its second tranche the non ratification of the ICJ. These are signs that the United States is acting unilaterally, as also shown with the vote on Palestine, the absence of a US ambassador to the UN for a period of six months, or during the Durban conference on racism.

Many outstanding issues have however been solved since the September 11 attacks. The US has thus agreed that the Security Council needs to make a public declaration on the question of Palestine, they also want a UN role in post Taliban Afghanistan and has supported the creation of a counter terrorism committee. The US has recognized the moral and legal uses of the UN.

However, fundamentally, the American attitude towards the United Nations has not changed all that much. The US is merely taking small steps to avoid too much isolation within the UN, which is still a “UN *à la carte*” for the Americans, still very much opportunistic attitude.