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Walking the International Tightrope

By Kofi A. Annan

As the United Nations enters a new century of challenges, we must find new ways to defeat the age-old enemies of peace and prosperity. In fulfilling this task, the Secretary General is accorded a central role -- by the United Nations Charter, by history and by the trust placed in him by member states.

I believe, therefore, that it is important for our friends and critics alike to judge the United Nations and my office with what Isaiah Berlin called a "sense of reality." By this I mean a realistic appreciation of the promise, limitations and responsibilities the organization and the officeholder face.

Above all, this means acknowledging that the Secretary General's office will have the potential to advance the interests of all states only so long as it does not appear to serve the narrow interests of any one state or group of states. This is the precarious balance to which any Secretary General owes his office, his strength, his effectiveness and his moral authority.

Every Secretary General before me has had to maintain this balance, through more than 50 years of geopolitical change. It is sometimes tempting to give in to one's feelings of personal outrage at a specific transgression, especially when to do so would win political popularity in some quarters. But that would imperil the Secretary General's ability to work effectively to prevent aggression and preserve peace. It is a luxury I cannot afford. The integrity, impartiality and independence of the office are too important to be so easily sacrificed.

The end of the cold war transformed the moral promise of the role of the Secretary General. It allowed him to place the United Nations at the service of the universal values of the charter, without the constraints of ideology or particular interests. In my two years as Secretary General, I have sought to pursue this role in two distinct ways.

First, I have sought to speak out in favor of universal human rights and in defense of the victims of aggression or abuse, wherever they may be. For Americans, the Presidency has been seen as a bully pulpit, at least since the days of Theodore Roosevelt. I have sought to make the Office of Secretary General a pulpit, too. From New York to Teheran to Harare and to Shanghai, I have sought, without attacking specific regimes or individuals, to use it as a vehicle for promoting the values of tolerance, democracy, human rights and good governance that I believe are universal.

Second, I have used my office as a bridge between two or more parties wherever I believed an opportunity for the peaceful resolution of disputes existed. To do so, I have embarked on many missions, confronting not only the doubts of others but my own as well. I have at times been as skeptical of a leader's true intentions as anyone, and I have entered every war zone without any illusions about the prospects for peace or the price of misrule.

But I have persisted, because I must deal with the world not as I would wish it to be, but as it is. I must confront it with a sense of reality about how far a leader can be pushed by peaceful means, and how long it will take to bring peace where a state of war exists.

Does this make me, or anyone in my position, morally blind? Can a Secretary General not tell good from evil, or victim from aggressor? Of course he can, and precisely for that reason he must persist, for it is ultimately the aggressor more often than the victim who will benefit from isolation and abandonment by the international community. Impartiality does not -- and must not -- mean neutrality in the face of evil. It means strict and unbiased adherence to the principles of the charter -- nothing more, nothing less.

Of the missions I embarked on last year, none was fraught with as much risk to my office and to the United Nations as the one involving Iraq. Confronted with a crisis in the relations between Iraq and the Security Council, I went to Baghdad last February seeking to break an impasse and to return the United Nations Special Commission -- Unsc -- to its vital work of disarming Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Briefly, but significantly, Iraq returned to compliance and Unsc inspectors were able to enter sites to which they had been denied access for more than seven years. I say "briefly" because Iraq subsequently decided to place new obstacles in Unsc's way -- a flagrant, deeply troubling violation both of the memorandum of understanding that I secured with Baghdad and of Iraq's longstanding obligations to the Security Council.

Since then, we have gone from crisis to crisis, punctuated by fleeting moments of cooperation between Unsc and the Government of Iraq. This back-and-forth culminated in last month's air strikes. Clearly, we stand at a critical juncture now -- between the use of force and the peaceful compliance I have always sought, between securing the disarmament of Iraq and the threat it would otherwise pose to the region, between looking to a future when Iraq's long-suffering people can live free and unhindered lives, and continued isolation and impoverishment for civilians who bear no responsibility for their country's calamities.

Members of the Security Council are now actively engaged in seeking a way forward, a way that can restore the council's unity while maintaining the disarmament of Iraq and alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people. For those who still remember the days of the cold war, the unity of the council in such an important matter will be recognized as a signal accomplishment. It is also what makes Iraq such a priority for me as Secretary General -- a divided council can, and has in the past, paralyzed the United Nations. I must and will do all in my power to avoid such a fate.

Whatever means I have employed in my efforts in dealing with Iraq, my ends have never been in question: full compliance with all relevant Security Council resolutions; the disarmament of Iraq; reintegrating its people into the international community; securing the stability of the region, and insuring the effectiveness of the United Nations as a guarantor of international peace and security. By precedent, by principle, by charter and by duty, I am bound to seek these ends through peaceful diplomacy.

Ultimately, however, the peace we seek, in Iraq as everywhere, is one that reflects the lessons of our terrible century: that peace is not true or lasting if bought at any cost; that only peace with justice can honor the victims of war and violence; that without democracy, tolerance and human rights for all, no peace is truly safe.

To apply those lessons wherever and whenever possible is a Secretary General's highest calling and foremost duty -- to himself, to his office and to the United Nations. My great predecessor, Dag Hammarskjold, once said that it "is a question not of a man, but of an institution." It is, therefore, for the United Nations itself, and the hopes and aspirations that it has embodied for more than half a century, that we must succeed.

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