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Global test threatens security

By Alan Meese

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In the first presidential debate, John Kerry announced what some now call "the Kerry doctrine." Under this approach, America can preempt threats to our security, with one caveat. Before launching preemptive action, Kerry said that the U.S. must first "pass the global test, where your countrymen, your people understand fully why you're doing what you're doing and you can prove to the world that you did it for legitimate reasons."

While Kerry did not spell out how much support his test would require before a nation could act, he made it plain that the 2003 invasion of Iraq failed his test. It was not enough that Saddam had defied 17 U.N. Resolutions, the last of which threatened "serious consequences" for noncompliance. Nor was it enough that Japan, Britain, Italy, Australia, Spain, Poland, and more than 30 other nations supported the invasion. We can only guess how many more resolutions and permission slips from other countries Kerry would have required.

Kerry's approach would depart from American tradition. (President Kennedy did not seek global permission for our 1962 blockade of Cuba, an act of war.) It's also a departure from his previous positions.

In 1991 Kerry voted against Operation Desert Storm, even though the U.N. Security Council had voted 12-2 to authorize force. This was not a case of preemption: Iraq had already occupied Kuwait, thus strengthening the case for force. Nonetheless, Kerry sided with Cuba and Yemen, who voted no. (China abstained.)

More recently, Kerry swung in the other direction, supporting operation Desert Fox, the American and British bombing campaign against Iraq in 1998. France refused to participate, and Russia and China vehemently opposed the action. This campaign failed Kerry's global test, but Kerry supported it.

ESSAY

Kerry's position on the use of force is evolving, much like his position on Iraq. The doctrine announced last week falls somewhere in between his 1991 position of near-appeasement and his 1998 support for go-it-alone preemption. While moderate in that sense, the Kerry doctrine would cede unprecedented authority over America's defense to other nations.

Nations possess the sovereign right to exist, free from coercion by other states or terrorist organizations. This right implies the right of self-defense, including the power to take necessary preemptive action. Submitting such decisions to a global test would subject these basic rights to an international popularity contest. Nations with numerous friends could launch preemptive strikes, while less admired countries would have to suffer a deadly attack before they could act.

A global test would also shift accountability away from the president and Congress, allowing politicians to blame foreign leaders for their own failures. A president who responded after an attack had killed thousands could claim that world opinion would have opposed preemptive action. In short, the Kerry doctrine would leave America at the mercy of shifting world opinion, as presidents forecast world reaction before defending the country.

These concerns are not hypothetical. In 1980 Israel launched a preemptive strike on Iraq's French-built nuclear reactor. The reactor was the cornerstone of Saddam's ambition to produce atomic bombs that could strike Israel. While the attack delayed Saddam's program by several years, the world community predictably condemned Israel's actions.

Jacques Chirac, prime minister when

France sold the reactor to Iraq, led the anti-Israel chorus. If Israel had felt restrained by Kerry's global test and Chirac's predictable outrage, Saddam would have acquired atomic weapons before he invaded Kuwait in 1990. We can only imagine the consequences.

Consider now a more recent example: the failure to preempt al-Qaeda before 9-11. Imagine if President Clinton had built public support for an invasion of Afghanistan after 1994, when Osama bin Laden set up operations there. Such an invasion could have destroyed bin Laden's training camps and disrupted his network before he attacked us. It may even have led to the capture of bin Laden himself.

Would such preemption have passed Kerry's test? Maybe the world would have supported such an invasion. Maybe not. The world had, after all, stood by during the Rwandan genocide that killed 800,000. Moreover, the U.N.

declined to authorize President Clinton's war against Serbia, sitting on its hands while Serbia supported ethnic cleansing. Whether the world community would have supported a preemptive invasion of Afghanistan is anybody's guess.

The uncertain outcome of this hypothetical inquiry simply underscores the fatal flaw in Kerry's new doctrine. In a post-9-11 age, our leaders should eliminate threats before they result in an attack on our homeland. A president who sought permission from Jacques Chirac and other foreign leaders before preempting such threats would fail his most basic duty — the protection of America.

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