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Response to Gardiner - 2

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Response

Andrew Latham

I. Introduction

Let me begin by thanking Dr. Gardiner for coming to Macalester and providing us with a thoughtful and thought-provoking critique of the United Nations, an institution near and dear to the hearts of many members of the Macalester community. One of the hallmarks of a quality liberal arts education is programming that purposefully exposes students to ideas with which they may not be familiar or even comfortable; that forces them out of their intellectual comfort zone, to think again about what they believe and why they believe it; and that allows students to experience the clash of large and consequential ideas. Given what I know of the Macalester “common sense” regarding the United Nations (not to mention our historical and contemporary attachments to that organization), I think it is safe to say that Dr. Gardiner’s essay does all of those good things. It certainly challenges many of our collectively held shibboleths about the U.N., and I have to say I have never before heard Ambassador Bolton described in quite so glowing terms on this campus. In short, I view this essay as a very welcome contribution to a potentially difficult dialogue about the future of an institution that I’m sure many of us think of as unambiguously good and virtuous.

That being said, how should we assess the specifics of the argument advanced by Dr. Gardiner? Put simply, I can sum up my evaluation in this way: even when judged in terms of its own project (which, as we shall see, is largely derivative of the broader neoconservative effort to renew American hegemony), his proposals must ultimately be found to be either irrelevant or counterproductive. More specifically, I will argue that Gardiner’s argument is premised on a deeply flawed understanding of “power” that equates the possession of material resources (weapons, money, etc.) with influence (the capacity to realize its goal, even in the face of opposition from others). Second, I will argue that his argument depends on a conceptualization of international hegemony that is similarly misguided by positing that American preponderance in the realm of material resources, coupled with the “obvious” moral rectitude of its global policy preferences, naturally confers upon the U.S. the mantle of leadership. Finally, I will demonstrate how all of

these errors converge to suggest a program of U.N. “reform” that is largely beside the point, at least if one is truly interested in renewing American hegemony. I conclude by arguing that what is needed now is not so much U.N. reform but “hegemonic reform” — that is, reform of the way in which the U.S. practices leadership in the international domain. To be sure, there are ways of tweaking the structures and practices of the U.N. that would make it (marginally) more effective and legitimate. Ultimately, however, the legitimacy and stability of the current U.S.-centered world order is a function of American leadership. Enlightened multilateralism has the capacity to breathe new life into the existing U.N., making the need for root-and-branch reform unnecessary. Predatory unilateralism, on the other hand, will cripple the U.N., no matter what formal, technical, or political reforms are introduced.

II. Neoconservatives, Hegemonic Renewal, and the U.N.

At one level, Gardiner’s project is the renewal of the United Nations Organization. His goal, he argues, is to suggest a set of reforms that will restore the confidence of both the United States government and the American people in an institution that is failing to deliver on the promises of its founding charter. At a deeper level, however, Gardiner’s project is actually part of the broader neoconservative project to renew American leadership in the global political economy. At the risk of eliding important differences of emphasis among its various adherents, neoconservative geopolitical discourse comprises the following defining elements. First, neoconservatives understand the existing world order to be dominated by states. While they accept the existence of non-state and institutional actors (international organizations, NGOs, etc.), they see these as relatively marginal epiphenomena of the state-system (the only partial exception would be global terror networks, such as Al-Qaida, and even these are viewed as dependent upon state sponsors). Second, neoconservatives understand power to be a function of wealth and military force. For them, influence in international affairs is directly related to the possession of material resources, such as weapons and money. Third, understood in this way, the U.S. currently enjoys an overwhelming preponderance of power, which necessarily confers upon it the mantle of global leadership. Fourth, the current era is thus “unipolar” in nature. In other words, it is one in which the U.S. lacks a serious “peer competitor” and thus

enjoys the status of being the “sole superpower” in the global geopolitical system. Deriving directly from this concept is the view that now is a moment of unprecedented opportunity to remake the world in America’s image by exporting the blessings of the American way of life, rewriting the rules of global order, and securing America’s current military, economic, and cultural pre-eminence. Finally, the neoconservatives see the unipolar moment as one of new dangers (terrorism, rogue states armed with WMDs, etc.) that must be met decisively with all the tools (military, diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement, and so on) available to the U.S. and its allies. Although *perhaps* tempered by recent experiences in Iraq, neoconservatives see the use of coercive threats backed by credible military force as a primary instrument of American statecraft.

Gardiner’s particular contribution to the neoconservative literature is that he provides a clear articulation of the ways in which adherents to this geopolitical school of thought (a) understand the United Nations and (b) believe it should be reformed. With respect to the former, the text clearly conveys the palpable sense of disdain-bordering-on-disgust that most neoconservatives harbor toward the United Nations. Beyond that, it also articulates the view that the U.N. is ultimately nothing more than a *nuisance* verging on becoming an *irrelevance*. For most neoconservatives, the U.N. is either an irrelevance in that it aspires to little more than “*realpolitik* by committee” (and is therefore congenitally defective) or a nuisance in that it is the site at which the world’s Lilliputians sometimes successfully forge politico-diplomatic bonds that they then attempt to use to restrain the American Gulliver. Thus, as part and parcel of the project of American hegemonic renewal, they tend to advocate abolishing or withdrawing from the U.N., or taming it by making it more reflective of, and responsive to, U.S. values and interests. Gardiner has clearly synthesized these two positions, arguing that the U.N. is, in fact, a bothersome nuisance sliding quickly toward irrelevance. For him, the “solution” (always framed against the backdrop of the underlying project—the revitalization of American leadership) is to impose a package of reforms in the realms of accountability and transparency, peacekeeping, and human rights. These might not save it from irrelevance, but would surely make it less of a nuisance to a United States seeking to impose its own values on, and pursue its own interests in, the world.

III. Conceptual Errors: An Immanent Critique of the Neoconservative Strategy

In assessing this project, it is useful to employ the Hegelian method of “immanent critique”—that is, to subject it to criticism on its own terms in order to highlight its internal inconsistencies and logical errors. Accordingly, I take as my point of departure the same premise as the neoconservatives: that the unipolar moment is propitious for reasserting and revitalizing American leadership in the world. I then proceed to demonstrate how a number of ultimately debilitating conceptual errors prevent neoconservative thinkers from understanding what this would truly entail, leading them instead to adopt a strategic vision that is directly responsible, *inter alia*, for the series of tragic blunders that is the Bush Administration’s Iraq policy.

A. The Naïve Concept of Power

Simply put, neoconservatives like Gardiner share an erroneous understanding of “power” that is possessive, material, and subjective in nature. It is *possessive* in that it rests on the premise that a state can possess a quantifiable commodity of power simply by virtue of controlling certain resources. It is *material* because it equates the possession of tangible resources, such as guns and money, with the ability to influence outcomes and realize objectives. Finally, it is *subjective* in that it ignores the social (or *intersubjective*) nature of power, at least in the sense of an ability to bring about desired outcomes in a multi-actor setting. In short, although neoconservatives sometimes talk about the “soft power” putatively generated by American culture and its “universal” values, they understand real power almost exclusively in coercive terms. In other words, they see power as the threat or use of force (whether military, diplomatic, or economic) to compel others to behave in a particular way.

While capturing something salient (coercion, after all, can have an important role to play in politics), this is a profoundly naïve understanding of power in that it ignores the social, intersubjective dimension of all human phenomena, and, perhaps more importantly, because it attempts to wish away the inconvenient need to negotiate with and accommodate others if one is to govern effectively. Somewhat more specifically, there are three fatal flaws with this conceptualization of power. First, it confuses the possession of material resources with influ-

ence and the ability to induce others to act in accordance with one's wishes. While there is a relationship between resources and power, there is no direct correlation. The first simply does not confer the second. Military power, for example, is not always convertible into influence across the full range of issues that comprise contemporary global politics. Second, even as a means of inducing certain forms of behavior, coercion and force produce only temporary, unstable, and costly forms of influence, a reality attested to by thinkers like Edmund Burke and Niccolo Machiavelli, who have been appropriated by the political right, as well as leftist thinkers like Antonio Gramsci. It effectively ignores the nonmaterial forms of power that flow directly from the social context of all human political relationships. *Pace* Mao Zedong and others of his ilk, power does not, in fact, flow from the barrel of a gun. At best, then, this form of power can produce *domination*; it cannot deliver *hegemony*, properly understood as involving consent as well as coercion.

B. A Tragically Flawed Understanding of "Hegemony"

Dr. Gardiner and other neoconservatives understand leadership or hegemony as a function of the preceding definition of power: preponderant power equals preponderant influence (which is by definition leadership). In this view, the unipolar moment is by necessity a moment of U.S. leadership because it is when the U.S. can exercise sufficient coercive power to establish the rules of the game that it feels best suit its needs, values, and interests. Obviously, to the extent that it is predicated on the naïve notion of power articulated above, this view of leadership is similarly flawed. Indeed, the failure to grasp the basic nature of political power seems to have led neoconservatives like Gardiner to conflate two quite different concepts: domination and hegemony. Since the neoconservatives came to power in 2000, this has had tragic consequences for America's position in the world.

As the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Robert Cox, and others make very clear, however, hegemony is not simply domination. It is a form of rule grounded in the legitimacy that accrues to a leader when (and only when) that leader pursues legitimate ends (goals that are widely accepted as providing benefits to both the hegemon *and* a substantial portion of the subordinate actors); legitimate means (methods that are consistent with generally agreed rules and widely subscribed institutional practices); and negotiated rule change (changes in procedural

and substantive norms that are at least endorsed by those subject to these norms). In other words, hegemony is a form of governance based perhaps implicitly on coercion, but in a more immediate and quotidian sense based on the consent of the governed. Unlike domination, which is always costly and unstable, history teaches us that hegemony tends to be both stable and efficient, if always (and uncomfortably for some) messy in the political sense of requiring negotiation, compromise, and accommodation.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, these errors converge within neoconservative thought to produce a deep disdain for the United Nations. But just as the underlying conceptual premises are deeply flawed, so too are the inferences that many neoconservative thinkers draw from them. While it may be suffering from neglect, the United Nations is neither irrelevant nor a nuisance. Rather, it is the principal entity that legitimizes the existing U.S.-based global order. Simply put, it is an indispensable element of American hegemony. Consequently, any attempt to revitalize American hegemony will require two steps.

To begin with, it will require reforms of the U.N. that will enhance its legitimacy. If hegemony requires consent—and if consent requires legitimate ends, legitimate means, and negotiated rule change—then the U.N. is necessary to U.S. hegemony in several ways: it confers legitimacy on specific actions (such as approval of policies as being consistent with global norms); it modulates U.S. policy so that it becomes more legitimate (that is, it “tweaks” hegemonic policies so that they become more consistent with global norms); and it legitimizes rules and norms that are consistent with America’s long-term interests. Significantly, while other international organizations are important elements of the U.S.-based global order, the United Nations is unique in that it is the only universal organization that deals with issues of international peace and security. Put simply, if the U.N. did not exist, Washington would probably have to create something very much like it. All this being the case, I suggest that America’s interests would ultimately be best served by two sets of changes to the U.N. that would enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. First, in broad-brush terms, the Security Council needs to be reformed so that its membership becomes more reflective of both the actual distribution of power and the major regions or civilizations comprising the

global community. Second (and here I agree with Gardiner), sustained efforts need to be made to address the problems of waste, incompetence, and corruption within the organization. Whatever the details, however, the key ingredient is that these reforms will have to be negotiated in good faith (no more threats of exit if Washington does not get its way). Carried out properly, in a manner consistent with the principles of power and hegemony outlined above, reforms such as these have the potential of enhancing the legitimacy of both the U.N. and the United States.

Beyond reforming the U.N., the revitalization of U.S. hegemony (the avowed goal of Gardiner and the neoconservatives) will require the reform of U.S. policy toward the multilateral order in general and the U.N. is particular. Put directly, and contrary to the prescriptions of Gardiner and the neoconservatives, the revival of American hegemony must involve the adoption of an international posture that is far more constructively multilateral than has been the case since the neoconservatives assumed power. The U.S., for example, needs to adopt a grand strategy that emphasizes (a) the collective framing of rules and laws to govern global political life as well as a willingness to subordinate U.S. interests to those laws; (b) the creation of robust multilateral institutions (to regularize power and help with coordination and cooperation); (c) the provision of certain "public goods" (maintaining the basic rules of the system, promoting cosmopolitan goods such as human rights, etc.); and (d) the impartial application of "justice" (including a reasonable degree of global distributive justice; justice for victims of historical processes such as forced migration, colonial oppression, etc.). Such policies would re-establish the legitimacy of American leadership far more effectively than the unilateral, and at times highly militaristic, policies espoused by the neoconservatives. Absent such a strategic shift, it is hard to imagine that any changes in the form, composition, or practices of the U.N. would have any significant impact at all on either the contemporary world order or American leadership within that order.