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Finding Shortcuts to Conflict

by Gregory Clark

The new Bush-Blair-Howard-Koizumi rules for waging war deserve attention. They say you are free to use whatever justification you like that if you want to attack someone.

If the justification proves false -- harboring terrorists and weapons of mass destruction, or WMD, in the case of Iraq -- you simply say that they might have existed, so what's the difference. If the other side allows inspections to prove the justification is false, you say why bother, since the attack is going to occur anyway.

Our forefathers would have appreciated the delightful simplicity of it all. They spent decades creating the now-outdated organizations and rules that were supposed to prevent or at least regulate warfare between nations. To enforce those rules they had to insist that the leaders of nations who declared war without valid justification should be strung up by their necks. Now all this is gone.

People who use phony justifications to wage war can strut the world stage as heroes, while continuing to pour contempt on those such as the Europeans who got it right from the beginning. Nor can the Europeans complain. They helped start it all with their phony justifications for the attacks on Kosovo and Serbia.

True, things were even simpler in the old days of colony-grabbing. All you had to do then was say you wanted to control a piece of property and away you went. Now there has to be at least the pretense of a pretext -- the various Operation Mongoose pretexts for an attack on Cuba, the phony 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident for an attack on Vietnam, the bogus claims of Soviet and Chinese hostile deeds and intentions needed to keep the Cold War going for another 30 years.

But the WMD/terrorist pretexts for the attack on Iraq break new ground. For even if the pretext can almost immediately be proved false (most other pretexts need years before they can be challenged), you can now simply turn around and claim that regime change was needed. With regime change, all you have to do is say that the regime in power is cruel and obnoxious and had to be replaced.

Since most regimes behave in cruel and obnoxious ways at times, this pretty well gives you carte blanche to go out and pummel whomever you dislike, while carefully avoiding harm to far crueler and much more obnoxious regimes that you happen to like.

Indeed, some might wonder why the regime-change argument was not used from the beginning over Iraq. It would have avoided all the embarrassment over nonexistent WMD and terrorists. The answer, of course, is that when the Iraqi regime was at its most obnoxious -- gassing Kurds and Iranians and executing political prisoners in the tens of thousands -- the United States, Britain, Australia and Japan were queuing up to win its favors.

U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld would have had a particular problem, with that photo of him warmly shaking hands with the Butcher of Baghdad back in December 1983. He came away saying that Saddam Hussein was "not interested in making mischief in the world."

Some might wonder what Japan is doing in the middle of this rogues gallery. For a long time it was mainly the perfidious Albion and other Anglo-Saxons who seemed to have the monopoly on inventing militaristic pretexts. Over Vietnam, Canberra managed to invent what has to be the granddaddy of them all -- the claim that the civil war there was in fact the first stage of a Chinese thrust southward toward Australia.

But Japan, too, has a good track record when it comes to inventing pretexts. Its 1930 claims that it had to invade China because the Chinese were unkind enough to be resentful over Japan's occupation of Manchuria and cruel bombing raids on Shanghai has to rank fairly high in the pantheon of phony pretexts.

Now it is back to the same business over North Korea. Somehow a Pyongyang admission and apology for past abductions of Japanese citizens, initially accepted by Tokyo, is about-turned and made into a pretext for world condemnation of North Korea as a criminal nation.

A joint Japanese-North Korean promise to let former abductees return to North Korea to persuade their children to go to Japan is turned around into an equally criminal North Korean refusal to allow the children to go to Japan.

And while accusing Pyongyang of all kinds of crimes and evasion over a few dozen alleged abductees, the same Tokyo sees absolutely no crime or evasion in its continuing refusals to apologize for, compensate for, or even in many cases to admit to, the far worse abductions and deaths of tens of thousands of Chinese and Korean forced

laborers before 1945.

But the U.S. too is no slouch when it comes to inventing pretexts over North Korea. Indeed, its latest anti-Pyongyang pretexts make even the WMD/terrorist pretexts against Iraq look respectable.

Somehow a North Korean promise to abstain from developing nuclear weapons if the U.S. will promise not to commit aggression against North Korea is turned around into a North Korean threat to develop nuclear weapons, forcing the U.S. to consider aggression against North Korea.

Tokyo hopes to climb in on the back of this U.S. aggressiveness. Its first move was an extraordinary campaign to link its specious abductee demands with the specious U.S. demands over North Korea's alleged nuclear program.

The second move has been the rush to pass emergency laws for defending Japan against some hypothetical attack from outside. The only possible purpose of these laws is to protect Japan from a possible counterattack when it lends its bases for a U.S. attack on North Korea.

The third move is the plan to have Japanese soldiers alongside the U.S. military in Iraq. This further sets the stage for joint U.S.-Japan military action against North Korea.

And this is the same Japan that used to tell the world that it had sworn off aggressive war for ever, and which still has a constitutional prohibition on even having an army, let alone sending it abroad. Amazing what you can do under the new rules of war.

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