FRIEND OR FOE?

John Bolton's nomination to U.N. ambassador mired in doubts, fears, anger as Republicans, Democrats debate president's choice for critical diplomatic post

The United Nations represents one of the greatest trends in human history. Its importance—or what it represents to the larger human experience—goes beyond immediate political goals. This is the primary reason that John Bolton, President Bush's nominee for U.N. ambassador, has caused such a stir.

Understanding why Bolton, a man who has spent a career questioning both the efficacy and legitimacy of the U.N., is wrong for the job requires we move beyond Bolton's disdainful attitude toward the U.N.

Rather than focusing on the letter 60-plus former diplomats signed opposing Bolton, reading the U.N. ambassador who called Bolton's nomination a "disaster," or focusing on Bolton's role in pushing faulty intelligence for political purposes, we need to review how the U.N. represents larger human—rather than parochial—interests.

After World War II, the allies asked: Where did we go wrong after 1919? By looking at mistakes made after World War I, Harry Truman and Winston Churchill understood that international stability could only be secured if the powerful agreed to cooperate, which meant moving beyond isolationism and punitive mindsets that swallowed the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.

This meant the U.S. would have to make a commitment to the international community and consent to restrain its power with its allies. By playing the lead role in creating a web of institutions to promote diplomacy, markets, and security, the U.S. demonstrated that while it was capable of wielding great force, it was also capable of employing "strategic restraint."

By foregoing immediate gains to secure long-term cooperation, U.S. support for the U.N., the Bretton Woods institutions and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization demonstrated we weren't simply interested in global domination.

This was unique. At no time in history had an empire as strong as the U.S. curbed its power, while committing resources and leadership to craft international treaties and build international institutions.

To be sure, the U.S. maintained its commitment to use force—the Truman Doctrine, First-Use policy, Containment, etc.—but the U.S. understood open markets and democracy couldn't be established at the point of a bayonet. Security in the post-war era went beyond military considerations and required that we establish political and economic facts that would promote America's grand liberal strategy at a global level.

America's "Liberal Internationalist" approach to foreign policy wasn't well understood 80 years ago—and is often misunderstood today—but it prevailed because Europe recognized the old way of empire and aggressive nationalism (the real "Old Europe") were prescriptions for failure. Binding institutions had to be built. Of these, perhaps the most interesting—if not most successful—is the U.N.

Many observers, like John Bolton, would disagree with this assertion. Instead, they focus on specific U.N. activities, where failures are abundant. They should be focusing on global trends promoted by institutions like the U.N., which include cooperation, the spread of democracy, patent protections, phenomenal growth in trade, and improved travel conditions, among others.

Critics like Bolton ignore these, failing to understand the U.N. was never designed to be a global peacemaker—has never been given the resources to operate as such, and has consistently been handed "orphan conflicts" that no country wants.

Yet, it1 was, and continues to expect the U.N. to solve the world's problems when its mission has never been geared to doing so. Critics miss that the U.N. has consistently provided a forum for dialogue and, in the process, helped build "constitutional" characteristics at a global level.

More often than not, gridlock is often the result of diplomatic grandstanding. But this isn't entirely a bad thing. Indeed, in contrast to the business world, stalemate must be viewed as a success in the international arena. Diplomatic logjams signal that diverse and competing interests have, in the best tradition of the U.S. Constitution, been integrated.

International institutions like the U.N. promote the grand American tradition of dialogue, while encouraging and attracting others into like-minded activities tied to diplomacy. While frustrating, the habit of endless debate, bluff, and counter-bluff is preferable to the failed alternative—war.

Forums and international institutions like the U.N. offer the world a set of governing values that act as a source of order. Even a militarist-tyrant, like Napoleon, showed he understood these dynamics when he observed, "Men are powerless to secure the future; institutions alone fix the destinies of nations."

Hostility between nations may never be erased from the human experience. But we have come to understand we can reduce the productivity and tendency toward war by building multilateral agreements that promote habits of dialogue.

By offering an alternative to rampant nationalism and paranoia of all stripes, the evolution of international institutions, and our embrace of the U.N. after World War II, constitutes a genuine revolution in the human story.

John Bolton has made it clear he neither respects, nor understands the U.N.'s historical importance. Sending an avowed antagonist of the U.N. to New York undermines U.S. interests abroad precisely when we need help pushing through U.N. proposals, like paying for the war in Iraq or securing more troops in the region.

The fact that John Bolton views the U.N. as counterproductive, or as a forum for beating allies and foes alike, explains why his nomination brought so many strong opinions. The history of the U.N., while imperfect, requires more from its U.S. ambassadors.

Mark A. Martinez holds a doctorate and is an associate professor of political science at Cal State Bakersfield.