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THE RIFT IN NATO: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ALLIANCE

By John Duke Anthony

Editor's Note:

Two days ago, February 11, Kuwait TV interviewed GulfWire Publisher Dr. John Duke Anthony on the divergence of viewpoint and position in NATO. The reference was to NATO's inability, for reasons of opposition by France, Germany, and Belgium, to agree on whether the alliance should declare its willingness to defend Turkey in the event of an attack by Iraq. The interview lasted just under an hour. Following is an edited and unofficial transcript of the exchange.

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Kuwait TV: It seems the situation regarding Iraq has reached the end of the road. In this light, what do you think is likely to happen?

JDA: I don't agree with the premise. We're not at that point. No one can truthfully say that all efforts to achieve Iraq's compliance with the spirit and letter of UN Security Council Resolution 1441, and other resolutions enacted against it that have not been implemented to date, have been exhausted. Just as it's [the diplomatic process] not over until it's over, neither has it [a war] begun until it has begun.

In all of this, a lesson comes to mind that does not appear to have been taken into consideration. It has to do

with June 1967. At the time, the United Nations was in the midst of a crisis occasioned by Egyptian President Nasser's having ordered the UN Emergency Force's troops out of the Sinai Peninsula.

[UN Secretary General U Thant acknowledged that Egypt was fully within its sovereign right to do so. This was the more so as the force, stationed in the Sinai since 1956-7, was inter-positioned between Egypt and Israel not because Egypt had invaded Israel. Rather, it was the other way around. The force was there as a result of Israel, France, and Great Britain's having invaded Egypt in November 1956. Subsequent to the cease-fire accords, Israel refused to reciprocate Egypt's offer, which would have allowed the Force to be positioned on Israel's side of the border as well.]

Egypt accompanied its move [to expel the UN Emergency Force] by declaring that it would henceforth deny Israeli freedom of navigation through the Strait of Tiran. When it did so, key Israeli military leaders regarded this statement as a *casus belli*. The United States was quick to argue otherwise. U.S. officials at the highest level counseled their Israeli counterparts to exercise caution and to not even think of citing or otherwise using Nasser's actions and statements as a pretext for invading Egypt.

The Johnson Administration was adamant that Israel sit tight and allow the United States and other countries to apply additional, more vigorous methods of diplomacy. These included, if necessary, having an armed U.S. naval vessel sail into the Tiran Strait to prevent Egypt's announced blockade from affecting Israeli shipping. For these and other reasons, Washington officials believed they had a realistic chance to defuse the dispute.

Israel ignored the American advice.

[In short order, Israel invaded and occupied Egypt, resulting in the closure of the Suez Canal for the next eight years and all the ensuing enormous economic damage to international maritime commerce, and resulting also in an Arab oil embargo of the United States and other Western countries deemed overly supportive of Israel; Jordan attacked Israel in fulfillment of its defense pact with Egypt; Israel defeated and expelled Jordan's armed forces east of the Jordan River, thereby launching what is now its 46th year of occupying the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem; and, before everyone's guns fell silent, it proceeded to seize and occupy two-thirds of Syria's Golan Province as well.]

The outcome was that a radically new and profoundly different international and Arab-Israeli situation came into being, one that has be-deviled all quests for regional peace and prosperity and world economic stability ever since. Indeed, much of the tension and rancor in the present looming crisis, and in numerous others in the region before this one, remains anchored in the pre-emptive actions Israel took in 1967 in a moment of heated action and reaction, and in defiance of more cautious American counsel.

Argued forcefully but unsuccessfully in the light of what transpired, the American advice was that unless there was a compelling and immediate threat - and with tens of thousands of Egypt's elite troops mired in a civil war more than a thousand miles away in Yemen at the time, neither criteria was present - any move by Israel to initiate war would be unwarranted. In short, United States leaders and many another country's leaders argued that an Israeli invasion and occupation of Egypt was uncalled for, being neither necessary nor wise.

Israel's use of pre-emptive war as an instrument of policy in 1947-48, 1956, and again in 1967 was catastrophic in all three instances. On the latter occasion in particular, it unleashed a rash of regional and

global consequences. The continuing impact has carried down to the present day.

The question is whether we have learned anything in the interim. Much of what transpired the last time a pre-emptive invasion was launched in the region would seem to be applicable to the challenge that we confront now. If no lessons have been learned, the chances are considerable that future historians will view what the United States seems inclined to do in the present instance in a far less favorable light in the event that it elects to cut short diplomacy and opt for starting a war with Iraq instead. If so, the reason will be that, in the eyes of a large number of its friends and allies, the United States' case for proceeding in this direction, certainly as presented thus far, is insufficiently compelling.

A major component of why America's partners in the two immediate previous coalitions that successfully brought peace to the Gulf are nowhere nearly as numerous or vocal this time around is because, in contrast to the two previous occasions, they have grave reservations as to whether the United States is right.

Among the greatest reservations these and other countries' leaders have is that, as was the case with Israel in 1967, the United States seems determined to proceed despite and against the informed and well-intentioned advice of some of its longest-standing friends and allies. This advice is that, before ordering American forces into harm's way, it should ensure that not just some, many, or most, but every possible diplomatic effort has been exhausted.

Kuwait TV: Thank you for pointing this out.

Turning to a different subject, what is one to make of the deadlock between France, Germany, and Belgium, on one hand, and the United States, on the other, with regard to Washington's hope that the NATO member-states would pledge to defend Turkey if it were attacked by Iraq?

JDA: What the three countries' leaders are doing is conveying their serious misgivings about the wisdom of taking such a stance at this time.

Kuwait TV: In what way?

JDA: To begin with, all three countries have millions of Muslims among their citizens and inhabitants. Many among these, together with the three countries' leaders, are deeply troubled by Washington's approach to this issue. They see the Bush Administration's positions as insensitive. They see it potentially as threatening to some of their most basic and legitimate needs, concerns, and interests regarding what should and should not be done with regard to Iraq at this juncture.

None of these three governments' leaders can afford to be seen acting as though they were a rubber stamp for Washington in a matter of such importance. They have a reason for not wanting to be viewed by their citizens as granting the United States an unqualified green light to do something that they believe is not only not in their interests but, worse, is against their interests. Much the same thing can be said regarding some of Russia's concerns.

Kuwait TV: How so?

JDA: Russia has natural concerns about any actions that NATO countries might take with regard to Turkey.

Until the breakup of the Soviet Union, Turkey was a longstanding neighbor. [Even now, Turkey sits astride the sea-lanes linking much of Russian maritime commerce and other naval traffic with the Mediterranean and seas further afield.]

Russia is also concerned for the potential adverse effect on the interests of millions of Muslims, most of whom were formerly in the Soviet Union but many of whom remain in Russia, who retain strong religious, cultural, and ethnic ties to Turkey as well as Iraq. For Russia or any of these three NATO countries to do other than what they are doing, saying, and recommending with regard to Turkey and Iraq would be imprudent. Worse, it would possibly risk exposing them unnecessarily to serious domestic threats.

Kuwait TV: In that light, what is one to make of China? China, too, has reservations about U.S. policies regarding Iraq.

JDA: China's concerns are similar, if not identical. China also has millions of people with age-old religious and ethnic ties to the overall region in which the impending showdown with Iraq is centered. This is on top of the fact that China, as a Great Power, has a growing range of strategic, economic, political, and commercial interests in how the situation regarding Iraq is handled, bearing as it does on matters relating to war and peace.

Kuwait TV: What do you think about [UN Chief Inspector] Hans Blix indicating that the Iraqis have not been as cooperative as they could have been?

JDA: Being neither an inspector nor a scientist schooled in the technical challenges that he and his colleagues have to contend with, I haven't an independent judgment. This is a matter for the UN Security Council to deliberate and decide once he has submitted his report.

What's clear is that we will know a lot more when we see what he has further to say a few days from now [Feb. 14]. But even then, with regard to whatever he and his colleagues may report, it's possible that one or more Security Council members may believe it is still too early to draw a definitive conclusion.

Right now, the Council is split. On one hand are those who believe the situation is sufficiently grave or hopeless as to warrant attacking and occupying Iraq without further delay. On the other hand are those who feel strongly that there are additional measures worth pursuing if only because they have not yet been tried and they would appear to bear promise.

Kuwait TV: Are you aware that Iraq has rejected France and Germany's proposal that blue-helmeted UN military officers be stationed inside Iraq to assist the inspectors and strengthen their hand?

JDA: No, I'm not; I've not seen such a statement.

Kuwait TV: But if this were the case, what would you make of it?

JDA: It's difficult to say, as the statement, if true, lacks context and detail. For one thing, I would want to know whether this is to be taken as an all-embracing rejection of each and every one of the several ideas that the French and Germans have floated in recent days. For example, they tabled at least two other, much less controversial suggestions. It would be hard to see Iraq rejecting both of them.

One had to do with trebling the number of inspectors in Iraq. Another had to do with France and Germany's willingness to contribute elements of their [respective] countries' aerial reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft to enhance the [UN] inspections' effectiveness. I'm unaware whether Iraq has turned these two recommendations down, whether they have been accepted, or what their status is. [Iraq, however, has dropped its earlier opposition to U-2 over flights.]

As such, the picture is not clear enough for me to make an informed judgment as to whether the rejection of the one specific request that you just cited means that one is at the end of the road. I'm not privy to the back and forth discussions of everything that has been and is being offered and considered. Few are. That said, I am familiar with some of the lines of argumentation that have been made by the French, the Germans, the Russians, the Chinese, and others with a view to arriving at a peaceful resolution.

Some seek to examine the potential impact of a beefed up UN presence around Iraqi seaports and at land border crossings, with heightened and more thorough inspections at these entry and exit points. Of course, this, in itself, would not be foolproof, for, apparently, as of now, airports would not be included. Yet such efforts could arguably increase the likelihood of preventing contraband material from getting into, or for that matter leaving, Iraq.

If an idea like this could be brought into play, I suppose the situation could be said to be much less dire than if such a possibility was dead or the prospects of its success non-existent.

But even if [it is] a non-starter, just how serious the [reported] rejection of blue-helmeted UN military observers would be in the overall scheme of things could turn on other matters. For example, it could turn on Iraq's response to proposals not yet made by anyone, on entirely new and different kinds of recommendations that could possibly be tabled by one or more parties before the end of the week.

Kuwait TV: But increasing numbers do seem to believe we have reached the end of the road. If so, what's likely to happen between France and the United States in the next three days?

JDA: No one can answer that except to say it is likely there will be continuing attempts between the two countries' representatives to find a degree of common ground. In any case, I would take issue with the premise. I'm not convinced that this is necessarily the end of the road.

Kuwait TV: And why is that?

JDA: For one, it seems to me that for the United States to act as though it is so disappointed at what France, Germany, and Belgium have stated they are not willing to do with regard to Turkey at this time is neither fair nor reasonable. I'm of the view that our having tried hard to force the issue at this juncture was lacking in prudence. It was premature and unnecessary. The timing wasn't right; it's still not right.

Kuwait TV: Please explain.

JDA: Many seem to forget that whether Turkey will allow the United States to use its bases to attack Iraq - [in other words, whether Turkey itself will elect to go to war with Iraq] -- remains unknown. [The answer to this question alone could have a lot to do with what Iraq would be likely to do or not do vis-à-vis Turkey in the

days ahead, and, perhaps, vice versa].

An answer to the question of whether Ankara will or will not permit the United States to use its military facilities to attack Iraq will not be determined, at the earliest, until February 18. That's when the Turkish parliament is scheduled to meet and vote on the matter.

It is not impossible that Turkey's legislature will vote to deny the United States use of its bases to attack Iraq. After all, Turkey is Iraq's longstanding neighbor, and Ankara has the country's own national security and related needs to weigh and decide.

[In 1991, Turkey allowed its bases to be used to accommodate an American-led allied coalition attack to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi aggression. For doing so, it instantly incurred enormous economic losses. It was also hit with a massive inflow of Kurdish refugees from northern Iraq that further burdened an already strained stability in Turkey's southeastern regions. This time, Iraq occupies no country but its own, albeit even that incompletely; the stakes for Turkey are correspondingly, fundamentally, and profoundly different.]

If Turkey were to say no, the United States would find itself in a grave situation. That is, almost all [military strategists and analysts] agree that Turkish permission for American troops to use the country's bases to launch an invasion of Iraq would be crucial to maximizing the prospects for the United States waging a successful campaign against the Baghdad regime.

[This past week, the Washington Post reported that the Bush Administration has agreed to allow Turkish troops to enter northern Iraq with the US troops -- how many, and whether behind, or in front or alongside of, is apparently in dispute -- in any American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. This raises an entirely different set of issues -- some would say specters].

Absent Ankara's approval for American troops to use its bases to invade Iraq, the United States, and many other countries, too, could quickly find the situation to be one in which not only the timing but the overall strategic wisdom of invading and occupying Iraq would need another look.

Because February 18 is yet to come, this is the context for my saying that the effort of the past few days to try to force a unanimous NATO vote as to whether the members, collectively, would or would not defend Turkey, was and still is premature. In effect, the American delegation to the NATO talks erred in being too eager - in the eyes of the leaders of three important countries, it tried to put the cart before the horse.

[In any event, if Turkey were to be threatened, let alone attacked by Iraq, Article 51 of the UN Charter, entitling Turkey and its allies to self-defense, would apply. This is the UN provision that was invoked by Saudi Arabia when it asked US troops to help defend the Kingdom following Iraq's aggression against Kuwait in August 1990. In the current situation, were Turkey to be attacked, implementation of the exact same principle would also extend to Turkey's fellow NATO members, as well as any and all other UN members that might wish to come to its defense].

Beyond bad timing, what also appears to have been missing from the U.S. side last week was a credible, good faith effort to view the NATO-Turkey issue from the perspective of France, Germany, and Belgium's national security and related requirements. Had this been done, or had there been any evidence of it in the formal discussions as reported, rather than make such a swift and summary judgment as to whether these three

countries made or did not make the right decision in terms of the challenge before them, a case can be made that the unproductive trans-Atlantic rancor that ensued could have been avoided.

Further, that high-ranking American officials, in the aftermath of this debacle, continue to indulge in sarcasm and derision directed at these three traditional American allied countries' leaders, whilst manifesting little if any empathy for their and their people's valid needs, concerns, relations, interests, and key foreign policy objectives, only adds fuel to a self-ignited fire. It is not cost-free, and it does no service to anyone.

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