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The Age of Impunity

Sudan's leaders sent out a letter last week warning governments against volunteering their troops for a United Nations peacekeeping force for Darfur. Khartoum was obviously feeling cocky. But why shouldn't it? The Security Council — or more to the point, the big powers that run the Security Council — made clear that it won't send in troops to stop the genocide unless Sudan first agrees.

Then there's Iran, which is still defiantly enriching uranium. And the North Koreans, who blew off the rest of the world when they blew off what they said was a nuclear weapon this week.

Welcome to the new age of impunity.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. The Iraq war and President Bush's with-us-or-against-us war on terrorism was supposed to frighten the bad guys so much that they wouldn't dare cross the United States. But the opposite has happened. President Bush has squandered so much of America's moral authority — not to mention our military resources — that efforts to shame or bully the right behavior from adversaries (and allies) sound hollow.

There is plenty of blame to go around when it comes to empowering rogue states. The Chinese have been shielding Sudan and North Korea. The Russians have been shielding Iran. Were it not for Iraq and Mr. Bush's other troubles, there would be ways to shame or bypass those roadblocks. When the Russians blocked U.N. action in Kosovo, President Clinton got NATO to stop the killing.

Mr. Bush appears to care deeply about Darfur. But the United States is so overstretched in Iraq that no one in this White House is even talking about sending NATO to stop ethnic cleansing that has already left more than 200,000 dead and displaced more than two million.

Closing our eyes for another two years isn't an answer. Washington needs to assert its leadership, no matter how tattered, on all these fronts.

We suspect that cargo inspections and a cutoff of military and luxury trade will not be enough to get North Korea to back down. But having started there, Mr. Bush now needs to tell China and Russia that all future relations will be judged on how they hold the North to account.

Beijing and Moscow would find it harder to say no if Mr. Bush made a clear pledge — no caveats and no fingers crossed behind his back — that he would not try to overthrow North Korea's government if it abandoned its nuclear weapons. Mr. Bush needs to make

the same unambiguous offer to Iran. As for Darfur, Khartoum might feel less cocky if Mr. Bush announced that he was taking the lead on soliciting troops for a peacekeeping force while asking NATO to start drawing up plans for a possible forced entry should the United Nations fail to act.

In his news conference yesterday, Mr. Bush said that the abuses at Abu Ghraib “hurt us internationally. It kind of eased us off the moral high ground.” He quickly added that the world had seen the perpetrators held to account.

We fear it will take a lot more than the trials of a few low-level prison guards to repair the damage, whether from Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, the secret prisons or the whole mismanaged Iraq war. There can be no impunity at home either.

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