America on the Edge of an Uncertain Future

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At the time of this writing, America is facing two crises that may require military force—a war against Iraq and conflict with North Korea. Our European allies believe they face a third crisis—America itself. The first two years of President Bush's presidency has created deep unease among America's European allies. European commentators pointedly ask whether America still a committed to the institutions of international collaboration it created in the months following World War II, or has America become an insensitive unilateralist, interested only in maximizing its already excessive dominance over the world? Commentators advocating a new era of American imperialism, previously on the fringe of America's intellectual life, now seem to be frequent visitors to the West Wing of the White House. Where is America going and what does it mean for its European partners?

Epochs of American Security Policy

To date there have been five great epochs of American security policy. The first epoch predated the formal founding of the country and continued until approximately 1820. This epoch was the period of fundamental national development. In geostrategic terms, America was a distant sparing ground on the fringes of European politics. America won independence in large measure because France decided to bloody Britain's nose in the rebellious colonies. This security epoch continued through the War of 1812 (the American name), which was itself an ancillary theater for the continuing geopolitical struggles of Europe. The epoch ended when America gained sufficient strength so that the Europeans decided it was not worth sapping imperial resources on a fight that would at best produce a neutral outcome.

America now entered the second great period of its security history, the period of relative isolation that stretched from 1820 to 1898. American energies were directed inward, to the vast heartland of America that needed to be secured and developed. It was not, however, a time of isolation. International commerce flourished. The tragic civil war created the first industrial Army, a phenomenon

watched closely by European military leaders. America was insulated by the Royal Navy from the power politics that shaped international relations in that day, and it suited our interests to be insulated. America became an industrial giant, with an economy far stronger than its military might. In short, this was an era of insulation, but not isolation.

A distinctive culture of optimism and exceptionalism was already emerging in American political circles, and it led forcefully to the third epoch, America's imperial era. During the Spanish-American war in 1898, America defeated a hapless Spain and inherited her colonies in the process. We were rather naïve latecomers to the empire game, pale in comparison to the vast British and French empires. Nonetheless, America gained an international reach and a global perspective. This outlook carried us into World War I, and even to the point of sending expeditionary combat forces into Russia. The tragedies of World War I and the failures of idealistic but immature American diplomacy ended this era.

The fourth epoch stretched from the early 1920s to 1941. It was formally a period of American isolationism. America politically sat back while the two great forces that dominated the century—national socialism and international communism—took root. While this era was a time of isolationism, it was also a time for military preparation. In 1934, the U.S. Navy built the largest drydock in the world, designed to build a new class of battleships. Indeed, there was not a single capital ship that saw service in World War II the keel of which was not laid before the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. The Army was widely rebuked for falling into vast disrepair. But in fact the mid 1930s The Army conducted the now-famous Louisiana maneuvers that effectively established the operational and logistics concepts for major force movements that were used in Europe in 1944 and 1945. The Army was given the assignment to manage the Civilian Conservation Corps. While the CCC is known for building roads through America's national parks, it was a prototypical base for recruiting and managing the Army that was quickly raised in 1942. So, while American diplomacy stood outside the major political movements that shaped the tragedies of Europe, America prepared militarily for the worst. As a reverse to the second epoch, this was an era of isolation, but not insulation.

The punctuation mark that demarks the fifth epoch occurred with the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. America raised a large standing army and sent it abroad on a global campaign. This produced a vast base of industrial strength and the physical attributes of military might, as well as the perceptions of international interests that carried through the Cold War.   The demobilization period from 1946 to 1949 marks relatively minor sub-phase in this larger epoch. This era finds America willing to actively lead an international cohort of like-minded nations, and to maintain a larger military establishment and position it in distant lands on a hair-trigger readiness posture.

During and immediately following the war, American leaders had to design a strategy to deal with two central challenges—containing a surging international communism on the one hand and manage the implosion of the European empires that collapsed during World War II. Beyond the obvious challenge of rebuilding society in Europe and in Japan-occupied Asia, western leaders had to find a formula for integrating those emerging post-colonial states into the international system of states on terms amendable to western political values and not let them fall to Soviet-dominated radical forces. America helped to transform the wartime alliance into the United Nations, and constituted it as the primary framework for this dual strategy.

The UN enshrined basic principles that were largely amendable to western liberal international traditions.

While the United Nations was the centerpiece of the initial security planning by the American government, it was soon augmented by NATO, other regional alliance organizations, as well as a large number of international institutions. America entered into legally binding obligations established through treaties, and in the process became the leader of an era of liberal internationalism. There were two dominant attributes to this period—the defining quality of an existential threat posed by the Soviet Union, and the central priority America gave to creating international institutions and standing alliances to bolster its side in the contest against the Soviet Union.

While punctuation marks in history are necessarily imprecise and subject to dispute, this era ended in 1989 with the breach of the Berlin Wall. The first attribute of this fifth epoch—the Soviet Union and its communist empire—collapsed and disappeared. The second attribute—the international institutions and alliances that informed western security strategy in the cold war—remain. With the disappearance of the great threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, America and its allies started to see each other in different light. The irritation with the United Nations in the U.S. Congress grew annually. American politicians increasingly saw the UN and other international institutions as venues for anti-American carping and feckless posturing.

The mutual alienation between the international community at the UN and America grew sharply during the Clinton Administration. The Administration battled the Congress early in Clinton's term over the President's willingness to commit American forces to marginal (in the eyes of his critics) military operations. Congress and the President battled each other over legislative provisions precluding American forces from wearing "blue helmets," a reference to UN military operations.

Nothing more dramatically symbolized the intellectual and political struggles of this transition period than the Kyoto global warming treaty. The Clinton Administration, and especially Vice President Gore, were so seized by environmental issues that they entered into the Kyoto treaty, touching off a scorching debate inside the United States Congress. Republicans (and a significant number of Democrats) were livid that President Clinton signed a treaty that he knew he could not get ratified by the United States Senate. Indeed, it was widely felt that the Clinton Administration had no intention of submitting the treaty for ratification, but intended instead to implement the provisions of the treaty as best he could through Executive Order. Critics charged that the Clinton Administration did this very thing with the ABM demarcation treaty, sign it but keep it from being submitted to the Congress where it would likely have been defeated. Republican critics, already intent on impeaching a president they despised, looked for ways to repudiate Clinton's foreign policy initiatives. The low point came when the Senate rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

President Bush, September 11 and a New National Security Strategy

The Bush Administration came to office fired with a conviction that the Clinton Administration had unnecessarily jeopardized America's national interests by participating in poorly conceived international commitments that needlessly tied

America's hands and made us subordinate to a culture of global internationalism that was now out of control. This more than anything informed the early decisions of the Bush Administration to reject the Kyoto treaty, to reject the International Criminal Court, to abandon the ABM treaty and the protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention. The Bush Administration seemed intent, not only on ridding America of dangerous Clintonism, but of signaling to the larger international community that America was no longer the passive recipient of feckless criticism by an international community that was desperately short on military capabilities, but abundant with unnecessary advise and counsel.

Tensions America and the outside world grew monthly in the first year of the Bush Administration. The international community, and especially our European allies, decried America's unilaterlism. The fact that European allies and congressional Democrats used virtually the same arguments and vocabulary, reinforced in the Bush Administration their view that they were right to press ahead and reclaim America's leadership role without apologizing for being the world's only superpower.

The terrorist attack on September 11 fundamentally reshaped the landscape in many dimensions. For purposes of this argument, terrorist attack on September 11 produced two major changes. First, the terrorist attack reversed two decades of disdain for the federal government and restored an American commitment to activist government. During the second half of the 1980s and through the 1990s, national political figures celebrated smaller government. Indeed, the partisan battles of the 1990s were battles over the role and size of government in American life. Republicans sought to force the Federal Government to shrink. The ideology was so deep it led them to pursue a disastrous strategy to force reductions by shutting down the government by denying appropriations. President Clinton successfully turned this tactic against Congressional Republicans, but did not change the basic culture that smaller government was a national priority. Indeed, President Clinton boasted during one "state of the union" address that "the era of big government is over." Democrats embraced an agenda to "reinvent government," which in essence was an effort to streamline bureaucratic process by adopting new computer technology and more modern business practices.

September 11 changed all that. President Bush promised a government that would defeat terrorists and protect the homeland. America looked to the government for security, and government leaders promised new levels of activism. The Congress and the White House set aside a decade long shared agenda to eliminate government deficit spending and rapidly passed major supplemental appropriations with out any concern for the budget impact. Congressional committees criticized the Administration for not asking for more funding for intelligence activities. Defense and domestic security spending rose sharply. The annual increase in the defense budget alone was greater than the total defense spending of Germany, for example. Even though the deficits were skyrocketing above previous levels, the government was united on spending for security.

Second, the terrorist incident created the political conditions for a more muscular national security strategy. The thinking behind this strategy predated the terrorist attack, and I believe would have been advanced by the Administration in any event. But the political climate created by the wide-spread support for President Bush in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist incident essentially cleared away any serious domestic criticism for this new strategy.

In January 2002, President Bush stunned the world by singling out Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an "axis of evil". In May President Bush first outlined the policy of "preemption." Administration spokesmen even went so far as to label it a Bush Doctrine. President Bush stated that America has the right and obligation to use military force to prevent the emergence of threats rather than wait for them to develop. Unlike earlier statements of pre-emptive self defense which are triggered by tactically threatening developments (e.g. Russia shipping missiles and it turns our nuclear warheads to Cuba), this policy of pre-emption would legitimize military action against nations that pose a likely eventual threat, even though they have not yet taken the steps that meet the traditional test of being a threat to stability and security.

These concepts were enshrined in a new national security strategy that was published in September 2002. The President's cover letter to the strategy summarizes the key thrust of the Administration's thinking:

> "The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. . . . And as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed. We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. So we must be prepared to defeat our enemies' plans, using the best intelligence and proceeding with deliberation. History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action."

The national security strategy argues that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and WMD technology, and the rise of suicide terrorism creates an unprecedented threat to America and to all western nations. The Administration takes another important step by stating "we make no distinction between terrorists and those who knowingly harbor or provide aid to them." The strategy points out that terrorists operate either where there is no effective government or with the complicity of governments, and therefore the inexorable application of this strategy is to confront either "failing states" or "rogue nations" that tolerate or encourage terrorism.

Pursuing the "Path of Action"

During the spring and summer of 2002, the Administration increasingly used the concepts embedded in the national security strategy to guide is campaign against Iraq. Indeed, it seems that the test of this new strategy for the Bush Administration is Iraq. Iraq fits perfectly the threat template outlined in the strategy. In increasingly harsh tones, the Administration singled out Iraq as the great source of threat and instability in the world. The President demanded and got from the U.S. Congress a virtual blank check authorization to go to war against Iraq at any time that he judged necessary.

The relentless drive toward unilateral American military action against Iraq took a surprising during in August of last year. President Bush returned to Washington after the August recess with a surprisingly conciliatory tone. He would

collaborate with the Congress and he would go to the United Nations to re-launch intrusive inspections, and to seek a mandate to justify military action against Iraq if Iraq failed to comply with UN Security Council resolutions. In a remarkable act of diplomacy, Secretary of State Colin Powell secured a unanimous endorsement by the UN Security Council for a renewed and strengthened inspection regime, which has now begun.

The President's decision to turn to the United Nations was hotly debated within his own Administration. One faction argued that Iraq was patently in violation of earlier resolutions and America had all the authority it needed to wage war. They also argued that a process of inspections permits Saddam Hussein new opportunities to confound the international community and tie America's hands through dithering and diplomacy. Besides, they argued, the international community isn't going to support us anyway and can only be counted on to criticize. So lets get on with it. The other faction saw that a unilateral action by the United States against Iraq also left us with the singular task of rebuilding Iraq after the war. The rapid defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan has dragged the Administration unwillingly into the dreaded "nation building" they so disparaged during the presidential election. But like it or not, overthrowing Saddam unilaterally gave America the sole burden of rebuilding Iraq. This need for multilateral support for post-conflict operations, and the clear demand of potential allies to have a legitimizing UN resolution led the President to go to the UN for a mandate to act against Iraq.

The President's surprising change in directions in August, and his decision to go to the United Nations for authorization to act against Iraq, has effectively left unresolved a crucial question central to this new national security strategy. The Bush Administration believes that the central security challenge of this era—failing states and rogue nations providing support to suicide terrorists—cannot be addressed in the traditional way. It requires pre-emptive actions to change the conditions inside sovereign states that threaten the security of the United States and arguably all nations. The UN charter enshrines the Westphalian concept that sovereigns have the right to organize the internal affairs of their nation-state any way they want. The international community has a right to interfer with those internal affairs only when the sovereign undertakes steps that create tangible and immediate threats to other member nations. While the UN has a large number of programs that deal with the severe societal problems in nation states, it pursues those programs only in a manner that is acceptable to the sovereign government of those states.

The unarticulated central premise of the President's national security strategy is that this deference to non-interference is no longer acceptable in an era of weapons of mass destruction. The President argues that these conditions necessitate a forceful activism to change the conditions that would threaten the security of member states before the threat appears in traditional forms that justify military response. The first test of this concept took place when the United States removed the Taliban government in Afghanistan. While there is no objective evidence that the Taliban directly contributed to the September 11 attack, it clearly harbored those who did. While the move against the Taliban government was not pre-emptive in terms of September 11, it was clearly preemptive of future terrorist incidents. As such, President Bush's decision to overthrow the Taliban government marked the first signpost on a road to a fundamentally new security epoch for America.

The campaign to overthrow Saddam Hussein seemed to be the first objective application of the new national security strategy. Ironically, however, the President's decision to go to the UN effectively confused this central issue. When the President went to the UN Security Council seeking a mandate to pressure Iraq and potentially invade it, he shifted the basis of his public arguments. Through the spring and summer, the President spoke sweepingly of the need for a "regime change" in Baghdad. Other voices in the Administration spoke of creating a model democracy in the Arab world, a step that would spread like a contagion among Arab societies and realign the region in positive ways for American interests. Yet when the President went to New York in September, he based the primary thrust of his argument on the need for the United Nations to face up to the challenge Iraq posed to the UN's credibility. He argued that Iraq was flaunting the mandate of the Security Council and the credibility of the UN hung in the balance. Since that time, the Administration has avoided the term "regime change" and has almost exclusively based its campaign against Iraq almost solely on the narrow focus of disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction. At one point the President even stated that if the UN inspection program accomplishes that goal, that would constitute a regime change of sorts that would be acceptable to him.

So we are left to consider the basic question. Has President Bush launched a new security epoch for America through a national security strategy that asserts the right to forcefully change the conditions inside a country that potentially threaten the United States? For whatever reasons, the President changed his goals in taking military steps against Iraq, and used the United Nations to ground his policies. Moreover, the campaign against Iraq is no longer based on the unacceptable domestic policies and conditions Iraq has created which threaten the west, but rather the explicit activities of the government that directly threaten the outside world as stipulated in a series of National Security Council resolutions. In essence, President Bush's national security strategy fundamentally questions a central tenet of international relations for the past four hundred years, but Bush's approach to the UN on Iraq reinforces the Westphalian formula.

Men Create Ideas, but Institutions Sustain Them

Are we on the edge of a new epoch in America's security policies? It is said that men create ideas, but institutions sustain them. President Bush inherited the ideas of his grandfather, passed on by the institutions that were created at the outset of the fifth epoch. Those institutions have received withering scorn in Washington during the past two decades. Indeed, many of the ideas embraced by the young turks that came into office to serve under President Bush have rejected the internationalism of the fifth epoch. For example, pressure to abandon the ABM treaty has been mounting for years. The fresh touch added during the past two years was a ringing denouncement of arms control treaties in general, not just the ABM treaty. The Bush Administration told the Russians that it didn't much care whether there was a strategic arms treaty any more or not, and that arms control treaties are undesirable in principle, since they enshrine concepts (e.g. mutually assured destruction) that change with time. Russia worked frantically to preserve the vestiges of an arms control agreement, though there is not much American commitment to the document that was signed. We see a similar pattern in the Kyoto global warming treaty, the International Criminal Court, the protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

At this stage it appears that the Bush Administration is ambivalent. On the one hand it seeks to launch a new security epoch with a call for preemption in the internal affairs of failing states and rogue nations. It unceremoniously jettisons treaty instruments that have widespread appeal everywhere except in the United States. It challenges the United Nations to defend its reputation or stand aside as the United States pursues military action against Iraq. Yet at the same time the national security strategy rhetorically embraces the UN, NATO, other multilateral institutions and treaty instruments as an essential element of our strategy: "We are also guided by the conviction that no nation can build a safer, better world alone. Alliances and multilateral institutions can multiply the strength of freedom-loving nations. The Untied States is committed to lasting institutions like the United Nations. . . ." Critics might argue that this is just a throw-away statement designed to neutralize critics. Yet one cannot ignore the actions taken by President Bush on the defining event of his presidency to date—the campaign against Iraq legitimized through the UN.

It should be noted that President Bush has not made the case for unilateral pre-emption that is acceptable to the American public. Polling in August indicated that by a two-to-one ratio, Americans support President Bush's campaign against Iraq so long as it is authorized by the UN. The support ratio reverses when pursued unilaterally. At the same time, the American public support's the president generally and finds that he is leading in the right direction. The President has not prepared the American public for the expense and the difficulties that will come from post-conflict nation building in Iraq if the burden is to be borne by America alone

How the Bush Administration resolves this ambivalence in the months and years ahead is a matter of intense interest, here in Washington and in allied capitals throughout the world. If America chooses to remain an active participant in the multilateral institutions of the previous epoch, it is likely to do so but in a way that might frequently make allies feel intimidated and uncomfortable. If, by contrast, the Bush Administration decides to pursue a pre-emption strategy unilaterally, it has the difficulty of finding a long-term institutional base for the strategy, since the expansive nature of the Bush Doctrine will likely result in an overextension of America's resources and a gathering together of America's opponents.

Implication for Trans-Atlantic Relations

America's partnership with Europe has been the linchpin of America's overall national security strategy for the past fifty years. While the partnership was never easy, and was often marked with tension and difficulties, the overarching threat posted by the Soviet Union forced a consensus. With the collapse of the Soviet Union a dozen years back, America and Europe no longer needed to submerge their policy differences in order to maintain unity against an external threat. Relations between America and Europe are today more strained than at any time in recent memory. We are now at the point where America and Europe need to decide what lies ahead.

Europe is by culture and custom deeply committed to multilateral institutions and instruments as the bedrock of state relations. America shared that perception, though with diminished enthusiasm in the past two decades. The events of September 11, however, have caused American leaders to realize that those international institutions as currently structured and operated cannot protect us against the most serious threats we now face. If we are to preserve the framework

of liberal internationalism as embodied in these institutions, America is likely to assume a more confrontational posture in order to force the institutions to deal with these problems. And America's allies, if they wish to keep America tied to these international structures and instruments will have to be constructive in moving those institutions to address these problems previously considered outside the prerogative of international forums.

From this perspective, the six-week long negotiation in the Security Council over the UN resolution concerning Iraq is encouraging. America pushed the international community hard, but also compromised along the road. Our allies pushed back, but in the end brought themselves to support the resolution. We can expect comparable challenges ahead.

We live in an era where the pathologies in distant societies can transform themselves into violence against innocents in our homeland. The September 11 terrorists were motivated by a deadly cocktail of forces—anger, humiliation, a quest for power, religious zealotry, the hopelessness of Arab society with its lack of opportunity and employment, the absence of venues for political expression. It is a large list. But the central point is that the pathologies that produced these terrorists have consequences in America and Europe. Yet the institutions of liberal internationalism—the United Nations and the complex of entities around it—have failed to deal with these pathologies. America can be expected to demand a more aggressive agenda to deal with these problems. Europe should rightly demand that America complement its instinct and preference for military force with a substantially more vigorous program to address root causes.

It is the interplay of these two instincts—the American instinct to use force and the European instinct to eschew force and to focus instead on underlying causes—where the new epoch might find its character and energy. America tends to look down on its European partners as weak and insignificant military actors on the international stage. Our European partners tend to disparage America's cowboy instincts and weak commitment to eliminating the conditions that permit hatred and violence to fester. The signs of the past four months indicate a synthesis is underway. Will it have lasting power? That remains the question of the day.