

From dissociated hegemony towards embedded hegemony

Multilateralism as a by-product of American security concerns

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An earlier paper by the second author, entitled 'Bella Americana: Some Consequences for the International Community' [1], dealt with the background and consequences of the American dissociation from the international legal and political order created after World War II. The current article examines this divergence in the light of United States foreign policy in general, pointing out that hegemony, unilateralism and pre-emptive strike together represent a certain 'constant' in American foreign policy. The article then examines the so called 'war on terror', trying to understand its flaws within the context of American strategic culture. Arguably, however, what has changed after 9/11 is not just the nature of security threats as such but also the global environment in which these manifest themselves. Taking supremacy of the world's military, technological and financial-economic superpower as a basis for further analysis, the issue becomes how to get that hegemony embedded in a multilateral setting. Here the notion of 'policy by-products' appears to open new venues. Continuing unilateralism, the article argues, would constitute a serious threat to American security proper.

During the most recent US Presidential election campaign, Madeline Albright addressed a largely American gathering at The Hague aimed at shoring up support for John Kerry as President. She prefaced her remarks with an ominous warning: America, thanks to a spate of reckless foreign policy decisions post 9/11 set in motion by a misguided Republican administration, had found itself in the middle of a perfect storm – floundering in what she argues is the worst foreign policy crisis to afflict post-modern America. Nothing short of voting Bush out and Kerry in would salvage the situation and bring it back to an even keel.

One year earlier, at the 2003 Pugwash Annual Conference, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, our founder and former president Joseph Rotblat in his widely applauded address made a fervent appeal to the International Community to influence American public opinion in turning the tide of US foreign policy. Alarmed by the Bush Administration's intransigence on nuclear disarmament and the imminent danger of such a stance, Rotblat's sentiments of 'regime change' in the US were in fact shared unofficially by many European Governments [2]. So unpopular are Bush and those around him overseas, that foreign leaders are reluctant to agree with anything the President says lest their own ratings take a dive. Quick to capitalise on the transatlantic divide, John Kerry suggested publicly that foreign leaders wanted to see him elected as President on November 2, 2004. He may not have been wrong. Foreign co-operation had come to a virtual standstill and governments in Europe and elsewhere were biding time and waiting it out till those November elections.

Now that we know that Kerry has lost, it can be questioned whether it was realistic to expect wholesale changes in US foreign policy with a new President at the helm of affairs. The US and Americans are often chastised for their ignorance of world affairs and general geographical ineptness, but one could also argue that there is a fundamental misperception in the international community of the traditional role of foreign policy in American electoral campaigns and an under-appreciation of bipartisanship on matters of national security. As important an issue as national security is in the US at present and as crucial Bush's misjudgement in the invasion of Iraq might become, the presidential election at the outset was already unlikely to become a referendum on the foreign policy of the Bush administration, as many European observers had assumed. There is a historical continuity in American foreign policy and one of the reasons for this is that it has never really been in the forefront of mainstream political debate. Moreover, there is little discussion on what constitutes a national security interest – global stability and championing the cause of political freedom and democracy in the world is generally seen as the linchpin of American foreign policy. Both candidates, as an international public is bound to notice every day, carry the stars and stripes on their lapel. The real differences arise around issues of strategy and how best to achieve these ends.

The constant in American foreign policy

American exceptionalism and its spill-over into foreign policy are based on a combination of three elements: hegemony (and with that the idea of expansion), unilateralism ('going it alone'), and pre-emptive strike [3]. While it may well be argued that George W. Bush has distorted the notion of pre-emption (responding with a military attack to an immediate threat that could in no other way be dealt with) into aggressive prevention (responding militarily to future threats before these have manifested themselves as imminent), unilateralism itself is, indeed, not exclusive to any one party but reflects rather a general mind-set in the American decision-making process. If there is a constant in American foreign policy, it can be found in affirmations of this form of exceptionalism especially in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001. The campaign rhetoric last year and the discourse on the 'war on terror' for example lend themselves not so much to differences in foreign policy perception but in strategy and how best to 'win' the war. Kerry's contention therefore was that he was better equipped than his opponent to fight that 'war'; the theme itself and its dissociation from international law remained undisputed.

Throughout the 19th century, the main ‘foreign policy’ issue in American politics was actually an economic matter, namely the rate of tariffs on imports. The fundamental question of protectionism and the role of foreign capital were major concerns dividing the Democratic and Republican parties. It is also important to recall that the US constitution, with its division of powers between the judicial, legislative and executive branches of the federal government, establishes that the focus of foreign policy rests with the executive branch. The President’s main job is to provide for national security. While this may seem obvious, it plays a major role in how the Congress defers to the executive in matters of homeland security and the response to the terrorist threat following the attacks of September 11th, 2001. Americans expect their President to lead the country when it comes to issues of war and peace and the safety of the country. So the issue of ‘strong leadership’ is a very important qualification in the public mind when it comes to evaluating presidential candidates.

But the constitution also reserves an essential foreign policy role to the US Senate. When Europeans criticise President Bush for not signing the Kyoto Protocol, for example, they should be aware that during President Clinton’s term, the Senate passed a resolution against the climate treaty by a vote of 95-0. Since the Senate must approve treaties by a two-thirds majority, it is clear that the impact of treaties on the domestic economy can outweigh foreign policy considerations.

Notably, the most dramatic example of the role of the Senate in American foreign policy came during the period after the First World War. President Wilson, who had campaigned in 1916 on the slogan ‘He kept us out of war’ failed to get Senate approval for the key element of the post-war settlement, the League of Nations treaty. In part, this was a result of the personal animosity between the Democrat, Wilson, and Senator Lodge, Republican of Massachusetts, the then majority leader in the Senate. Wilson elected not to take any senior Republican leaders to the Paris peace talks after the war, and the issue of America’s post-war role in the world became a partisan political issue.

Partly as a result of this bitter experience, a bipartisan consensus emerged during and after World War II. Senator Vandenberg, also Republican and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the Truman presidency, made the famous statement that ‘politics stopped at the water’s edge’, i.e., that foreign policy was not to be a partisan issue. The risks to the nation’s interests of having a coherent and reliable foreign policy – especially during the Cold War – outweighed the potential political gains.

To say that during the Cold War American foreign policy was bipartisan is, of course, not entirely accurate. While the anti-communism of the McCarthy period had more to do with domestic politics than foreign policy, clearly there was a partisan element to the debate about national security then. And, foreign policy played a major part in presidential elections, despite the broad agreement between the two parties on America’s role in the world during the 1950s. Eisenhower campaigned on a peace platform during the Korean War. Kennedy argued the Republicans had paid insufficient attention to national defence, accusing his opponents of allowing a ‘missile gap’ to develop between the US and the Soviet Union. But it is safe to say that generally there was no fundamental difference between Democratic and Republican foreign policy. Indeed, arguably, under Kennedy, the US pursued a much more aggressive foreign policy which in fact led to the Vietnam engagement.

Our conclusion is that obviously there is a lot more continuity in American foreign policy than changes of direction. Even the popular division of American policy into ‘multilateral’

periods or 'unilateral' periods is misleading. The real division in American foreign policy is between internationalists and isolationists and the internationalists have been dominant for a long time in both parties. The US has traditionally viewed its national interests as consistent with the pursuit of global stability, and taken a practical approach to this overriding goal. When the US can obtain international support to this end, all the better; when not, as long as there is support in Congress for a particular course of action as being consistent with national security, then the issue is likely not to be politically contentious. So against this backdrop, what role should the international community play in influencing the direction of US foreign policy towards a multilateral embedding?

In this respect, it is worth pointing out that the international community as such is an abstraction. There is no legal entity or person by that name. No doubt the United Nations, which consists of almost all the states in the world, reflects for certain purposes the views of or acts in the name of the states, and to that extent represents a formal international community. But whether it does so substantially is contingent. There have been notable cases where the United Nations has failed to act when confronted with situations, which on any view are of general concern, while in some instances these constitute an affront to 'the conscience of humankind' [4]. It is, indeed, difficult to accept that the states and peoples of the world are now in a position where their legitimate collective concerns as to particular conduct are to be channelled exclusively through the United Nations. In giving extensive powers and functions to the United Nations, and a limited monopoly in respect of control of the use of force, the states and the peoples invoked in the Charter did not give up entirely their individual capacity to act. World peace through world law [5] is, indeed, not yet a fully available option and most probably never will be. Formation and execution of power for the sake of security without a solid legal base remains inevitable, especially in a global context. Yet, the point is that whenever that takes place, its objectives and focus have to be questioned continuously – within and without the United Nations – while a genuine effort has to be made to incorporate not only political but military and economic power too, in an international legal setting. Insofar as global power formation cannot be based on principles of representative democracy, power sharing constitutes the next best. Essential in this respect is the incorporation in decision-making of not primarily 'the willing' but precisely those constituent parts of international opinion-making that hold different views. Military power may, indeed, provide security, but it can also attract danger and lead to new threats [6], as illustrated rather horrendously in post-war Iraq.

The 'War on Terror'

The initial post 9/11 reaction outside America was largely one of sympathy and concern but expressed in different forms. Many Arab and Muslim countries, as represented by important spiritual and religious leaders in the Middle East, were quick to condemn the attacks and made it clear that such acts were morally reprehensible and anathema to Islam. For some though, there was also a feeling that the chickens had come home to roost – America through its sometimes blundering, violent and insensitive policies brought this upon itself and perhaps the gravity of the attacks would now galvanise American opinion into deep introspection and effect positive change in American foreign policy. America might now finally take notice of the plight of other countries experiencing the same terrorism and unite nations in a genuine effort

to rid the world of this scourge. But nothing of the sort happened – the need for rational argument and nuanced analysis that could have (and should have) taken centre stage in mainstream American politics was largely ignored in the corridors of power. Those with political axes to sharpen won the day and helped pave the way towards a second tragedy of missed opportunities.

Notably, the whole idea of a ‘war on terror’ is a misnomer and a gross misstatement: there is no war that one could tangibly identify, let alone ‘win’. Indeed, while convenient for public consumption, the dynamics are complex – this is not a zero-sum game in which the ‘we win and you lose’ scenario works. Moreover, the entity currently called Al Qaeda is less an organisation than an ideology. The Arabic word *qaeda* can be translated as ‘base of operation’ or ‘foundation’, or alternatively as a ‘precept’ or ‘method’. Islamic militants always understood the term in the latter sense. In 1987, Abdullah Azzam, the leading ideologue for modern Sunni Muslim radical activists, called for ‘*al-qaeda al-sulbah*’ (a vanguard of the strong). He envisaged men who, acting independently, would set an example for the rest of the Islamic world and thus galvanise the *umma* (global community of believers) against its oppressors. It was the FBI – during its investigation of the 1998 US Embassy bombings in East Africa – which dubbed the loosely linked group of activists that Osama bin Laden and his aides had formed as ‘al Qaeda’. This decision was partly due to institutional conservatism and partly because the FBI had to apply conventional antiterrorism laws to an adversary that was in no sense a traditional terrorist or criminal organisation.

Although bin Laden and his partners were able to create a structure in Afghanistan that attracted new recruits and forged links among pre-existing Islamic militant groups, they never created a coherent terrorist network in the way commonly conceived. Instead, al Qaeda functioned like a venture capital firm – providing funding, contacts, and expert advice to many different militant groups and individuals from all over the Islamic world.

Today, the structure that was built in Afghanistan has been destroyed, and Osama bin Laden and his associates have scattered or been arrested or killed. There seems to be no longer a central hub for Islamic militancy. But the al Qaeda worldview, or ‘al Qaedaism’, is growing stronger every day. This radical internationalist ideology – sustained by anti-Western, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic rhetoric – has adherents among many individuals and groups, few of whom are currently linked in any substantial way to bin Laden or those around him. They merely follow his precepts, models, and methods. They act in the style of al Qaeda, but they are only part of al Qaeda in the very loosest sense. That is why Israeli intelligence services now prefer the term ‘*jihadi international*’ instead of ‘al Qaeda’.

Naturally, then, in their confrontation with these ideologically inspired terrorist networks, the United States is looking for allies and coalitions. What is questionable, however, is the distance taken from an emerging international legal order predicated on human rights principles. This reluctance to participate in the institutions of international law derives precisely from the home-grown contention that the rights of Americans are embodied in the US Constitution and are subject to local consent and national popular sovereignty. US non-ratification of international rights conventions and newly established institutions, however, run counter to US interests in the long run and puts a spoke in the wheel of international legitimacy and justice. This is, indeed, the main point we should like to make here: rather than confronting US security discourse with a normative human rights based discourse, we would advocate an imminent dialogue, based precisely on America’s own security concerns.

Strategic culture

It is in politics that cultural conversations become most explicit: What ends should the nation pursue? What means should it use? Foreign policy is at a very high end on a spectrum of conversational explicitness because it concerns relations with outgroups; outgroups serve the dual purpose of acting as a source of national identity (we are not like them) and as a threat to national identity (we must resist becoming like them). Suffice it to say, it is only through definitions of the 'other' that we can carve out a distinctive niche for ourselves (us versus them).

The disturbing linkage between socio-political naiveté and socio-political power became the underpinning of American politics when the administration quickly opted for an oversimplistic 'us versus them' dualism ('whoever is not for us is against us' [7]), immediately translated into the latest chapter of the story of 'good against evil'. Any attempt to analyze the causes through self-examination was seen as comforting to the 'enemy' and those who suggested such analysis were vilified and branded 'unpatriotic'. America has lost the moral ascendancy it inadvertently gained in the immediacy of the attacks and frittered away the opportunity to build a genuine domestic and foreign coalition that could have so easily emerged from the debris of 9/11. Instead, jingoistic, triumphalist rhetoric and a continuing tendency to see things in facile ways only served to feed the very Manichaeism whose existence has already created so many problems.

Crucial in our attempts to understand this reaction is the location of an American strategic culture, where strategic culture can be defined as a people's distinctive style of thinking and dealing with the problems of national security. Strategic culture, more often than not, is couched in explanations of war and conflict. It is fuelled by the construction and maintenance of the boundaries of identity and invites a bi-partisan approach in the implementation of critical areas in foreign policy. The stars and stripes on the lapels of both President Bush and his opponent Kerry symbolise trust in 'that greatest nation on earth'. 'The President's job', Bush said in the context of his campaign for re-election, 'is not to take an international poll; the President's job is to defend America'.

It is possible in this context then, to argue that there is a uniquely American approach to strategy. But is this strategic culture predicated on deeply rooted cultural traits embedded in the American polity (read 'American exceptionalism'), on a more short-term, secular historical experience devoid of the cultural element, or on a fusion of both? Strategic culture in the American context, it seems, is none of these three: it is more the product of a 'micro-culture' at work and less amenable to explanation by any meaningful compartmentalisation of cultural thinking on foreign policy issues.

The American foreign policy establishment has traditionally underestimated and at times ignored the importance of cultural influence when dealing with the threats and opportunities of the world around them. American ethnocentrism at the foreign policy level is precisely the result of this failure to understand value systems and cultural proclivities that could predict tendencies. It was during the cold war that the need to conceptualise strategic culture as an instrument of analysis first arose. While it could be argued that the constraints of bipolar rivalry largely nullified the domestic idiosyncrasies of nations, the reality today is quite different: The end of the Cold War will logically allow more artificial strategic cultures to give way to more culturally rooted ones, and it may become increasingly difficult to predict patterns

of interaction in the international arena without examining national security and foreign policy in the framework of cultural influence. However – and this is the critical point – in the framework of international security, a culturally rooted strategic culture is predicated on national security imperatives and not civilizational ones. For instance, to speak of an ‘Islamic bomb’ is to deny the fact that the Islamic world is not a monolithic entity but a geographically and historically disparate group of states with very real differences. More accurately, it is extremely difficult to identify leaders of a civilization, and from a practical standpoint, it is virtually impossible to actualise threats made in the name of civilizations (like declarations of a holy war or jihad) precisely because the only underlying institutions that could put them into effect are nation states. Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ as we understand it is not a monolithic entity but rather a diverse ideology that manifests itself very differently in socio-political life – some positive, some negative: For instance, the Ikhwan (the Muslim Brotherhood) has aligned itself with the monarchy in Jordan and plays a moderate (even constructive) role in some Arab countries. They are more radical in Egypt, Algeria and The Occupied territories (Hamas). The point is – there is no conspiracy or ‘group dynamic’ within a divided Islamic world. Moreover, what counts is not fundamentalism but radical extremism. The American propensity to lump fundamentalists into the category of ‘dangerous extremists or terrorists’ is self-defeating. A more nuanced, better informed analysis is needed.

It is only from a monolithic non-nuanced perspective that the war in Iraq made much more sense to the American war cabinet than focusing on dismantling and destroying Osama bin Laden and his network, although the latter always constituted a greater threat to America and the world than Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction (that in the end were never found). Bill Clinton was probably correct in asserting that in times of crisis and insecurity the American people want a leader that is ‘strong and wrong’ rather than one who is ‘weak and right’. And perhaps President Bush had to act quickly and decisively in order to restore confidence in the country and assuage the fears of the American people.

But the Iraq misadventure may yet turn out to be the biggest strategic and tactical blunder since the Bay of Pigs fiasco. The quagmire that the Bush Administration precipitated will in all likelihood have disastrous long-term consequences for American foreign policy and further alienate allies already disillusioned by an unabashed display of arrogant American certitude. The damage may already have been done. Once the machinery for the foreign policy implementation process is set in motion, it becomes difficult (and often politically risky) to dislodge. It is extremely unlikely, for instance, that a new democratic administration will be able to roll back the current Iraq policy despite fundamental differences on the very question of whether it was right to go in there in the first place. The foreign policy apparatus simply does not allow for such wide-scale changes. For instance, since Kerry had voted in the US Senate for the war in Iraq this put the Democrats in a quandary and made it that much more difficult for their candidate to articulate clear policy objectives on Iraq that markedly differed from the ones adopted by the Bush administration. This may help explain why John Kerry in his campaign rhetoric had been unconvincing on Iraq and on how he planned to restore the loss of American credibility and respect around the world.

Insofar, then, as election results matter in respect of American security choices in our world today, it was probably the Bush versus Gore ballot (and its interpretation by the Supreme Court in its 5:4 judgment) rather than the Bush versus Kerry vote that mattered a lot.

Elections, however, are like water under the bridge: the issue remains how to get US hegemony embedded in a multilateral setting.

Multilateralism as a by-product of American security concerns

Understandable as US unilateralism may be in the light of disappointments far from home, defending America today requires a substantial change in strategic culture. It will not have much effect, however, to confront unilateralist national security discourse with a Universal human rights-based communication. But it is precisely within the context of current concerns with international terrorism that the international legal order manifests its primary significance. To clarify what is meant here, we should like to present the notion of policy by-products.

The term 'by-product' means that production is not primarily aimed at, nor automatic; yet it may be regarded as essential. Let us take democracy as an illustration here. Notably, that system implies the constitution and acceptance of government by its citizens or, in other words, legitimacy. Indeed, for Fukuyama [8], the advocate of liberal democracy as 'the end of history', a regime is democratic when it is legitimised through the consent of the ruled. Here, democracy and legitimisation become synonyms. It is also possible to see legitimacy as an essential by-product of democracy [9]. The term 'by-product' means, indeed, that the 'production' of legitimacy is not automatic; nevertheless it is essential for without it democracy will lose its meaning. 'Without the citizens' support, who recognise the regime as being legitimate, a political democracy cannot survive' [10]. A problem with pure by-products is, generally, that they cannot be aimed at, even where their production is regarded as essential. Thus, paradoxically, politicians in power cannot just aim at legitimacy, through major efforts in public relations for example. Rather, they have to aim at the right policies and if these are successful they might produce 'people's subjective perceptions' [11] that constitute the regime's legitimacy.

In a similar vein, American strategic culture's pre-occupation with national security implies that a close relationship between the US and the international legal order cannot be aimed at directly. Indeed, in the final analysis, both the international community and the US must break the habit of making assumptions based on their own wish lists. As long as American primacy reigns supreme, the US is not going to be bogged down by international treaties or international law if it perceives its national security to be under threat. And no country in its present form is going to develop a defence capability that rivals that of the US so that it could engage in pre-emptive actions on the global stage. What is abundantly clear though is that global interdependence, especially in light of powerful destabilising forces at work such as 'al Qaeda', has never assumed greater significance than it has today. It is precisely the global chaos that international terrorism aims at, which requires a response that is based on the international rule of law. Moreover, going it alone all the time the US would make itself as a country and American citizens wherever they might find themselves, a primary target of Jihad ideology and consequently of its terrorist methods. And finally, the international community would be rendered impotent without US support [1]. The sooner each side accepts these realities, the sooner they can start building a viable common agenda that will bring them out of 'the perfect storm' (Madeline Albright) and into calmer waters.

Notes

1. Bas de Gaay Fortman, *Bella Americana: the need for global reform*, in: Paul van Seters, Bas de Gaay Fortman and Arie de Ruijter (Eds.), *Globalization and Its New Divides: Malcontents, Recipes, and Reform*, Dutch University, Amsterdam Press & Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, IN, 2003, pp. 225-233.
 2. The term regime change implies a serious deviation from the gist of the United Nations Charter and hence is to be resisted rather than being uncritically assumed. Although, clearly, change of administration is a different matter, it remains questionable whether non-Americans would do wise to opt for an American party political strategy. In [1] it was argued that not even Americans themselves would do wise to base their opposition to the Bush Administration's position with regard to the international legal order on the need for 'regime change'. The United States enjoys one political regime since 1776 (with an insecure period during the Civil War), and despite its defaults and deficiencies the general feeling in that country is that it has served them well.
 3. James Chace, *Empire, anyone?*, *The New York Review of Books* 51 (15) (7 October 2004) 15-18.
 4. Rwanda 1994 and Srebrenica 1996 are cases that immediately come to mind here. Currently, it is the situation in Darfur (Sudan) that is subject to a moral-political debate, which is as yet unsettled.
 5. See the magnum opus of Grenville Clark and Louis B. Sohn, *World Peace through World Law*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1958.
 6. Cf. W. F. de Gaay Fortman, *Recht en vrede*, in: B. de Gaay Fortman (Ed.), *Christendom en oorlog*, Kok, Kampen, 1966, p. 151.
 7. Notably, Jesus had formulated this aphorism the other way round and hence more modestly: 'Whoever is not against us, is for us!'
 8. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York, 1992.
 9. Herman van Gunsteren and Rudy Andeweg, *Het grote ongenoegen: over de kloof tussen burgers en politiek*, Aramith, Haarlem, 1994.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
 11. See [8, p. 15].
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