

National Sovereignty & Universal Challenges: Choices for the World After Iraq

Background Document

“The End of the American Era”

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“A Parting of Ways: Europe and America are not coming back together. This is not a Catastrophe”

American and British troops are in the midst of prosecuting a war in Iraq that Germany, France, Russia, and most of Europe's citizens see as unjust and unnecessary. Policy-makers and analysts on both sides of the Atlantic tend to see this rift as temporary, a passing product of differing opinions about how best to deal with Saddam Hussein. This interpretation is dangerously misguided. Opposing views on the Iraq war are a symptom, not a cause, of a widening transatlantic divide that has deep roots - and is likely to prove irreversible.

The growing separation between Europe and America, which calls into question the viability of a community founded upon the principle of indivisible security, is the product of ongoing changes on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, new geopolitical conditions are compelling the EU to strive for more strategic autonomy from the United States. At the same time, America's unilateralist behaviour has irked many Europeans, inducing them to wonder whether they would want to remain under America's shield even if it were available. Rather than welcoming a dominant U.S. role in the world, many Europeans are coming to see America as a superpower that has lost its way – and needs to be contained.

Traditional power politics is also at play, with the maturation of the European Union furthering the separation of Europe from America. History is paradoxically reversing itself. During the nineteenth century, the United States gradually came together as a unitary federation, emerged as a great power, and demanded of European nations that they make room for a rising America. Now the EU is gradually coming together, increasing its collective character, and demanding of America that it accord Europe greater weight.

In addition, a changed political discourse is emerging. Instead of justifying integration as a way to check the power and geopolitical ambition of the national state, it portrays integration as a way to acquire power and project geopolitical ambition for Europe as a whole. It used to be only French leaders who called for the EU to emerge as a counterweight to the United States. Now virtually all other European leaders have joined in. Although the current crisis has unquestionably weakened European unity for now, it may well have the opposite effect over the longer run. The Atlantic Alliance has been dealt a fatal blow by the Iraq crisis, essentially foreclosing the option of an Atlanticist Europe. France and Germany have realized as much and the Poles and their neighbors in Europe's center can ignore reality for only so long; Warsaw and other like-minded capitals will soon realize they have no choice but to settle for a

strong EU.

Changes taking place in the United States are equally profound - and paint a similarly gloomy picture of the future of the Atlantic Alliance. America began losing interest in remaining Europe's protector well before the rift over Iraq. Europe is wealthy and at peace. America faces pressing strategic challenges elsewhere, especially in the wake of September 11. There is simply no compelling reason for the United States to remain a European power.

It is not only America's strategic priorities that are changing, but also the character of its internationalism. The centrist multilateralism of the Cold War is giving way to unilateralist alternatives, which have a long tradition in America's political culture and its preoccupation with liberty and sovereignty. In the absence of the Cold War threat, which bound America to allies and international institutions, this libertarian tradition is reasserting itself. Were Democrats in the White House, Europeans would likely find the United States somewhat more pliant. But they would still find little enthusiasm for the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, or other initiatives over which America and Europe have differed sharply.

The challenge for the future is thus not repairing the Western Alliance. That is a lost cause. Instead, it is to ensure that the end of alliance takes the form of an amicable separation rather than a nasty divorce. As the war in Iraq drags on, even that challenge may well prove most difficult to attain.

Die Zeit, May 22, 2003

"Europe Sets the limits of the United States"

With the dust still settling in Baghdad, it is too soon to judge how the Iraq war and the transatlantic rift that accompanied it will affect the evolution of the international system.

From one perspective, the United States demonstrated its overwhelming military might and its willingness to use it, with clear lessons. Germany, France, and Russia had better do what they can to make up with the world's only superpower. Rogue nations had better prepare for the worst. A new American century is poised to unfold.

From another perspective, the war seems to mark just the opposite, the end of the American era. The United States may have unfurled its new doctrine of preemption and preeminence. But in doing so, it also has acted against the court of world opinion, compromising its international legitimacy. America's benign hegemony is no longer so benign. From here on out, countries may well resist rather than rally behind U.S. leadership.

This second vision is far more likely to be the accurate one. The war over Iraq was a symptom, not a cause, of the rift that has divided America from much of the world. Most members of the U.N. Security Council were prepared to resist Washington's rush to war because they had already come to believe that the United States posed a greater threat to international stability than Iraq. American unilateralism, strengthened by the vulnerability and anger left behind by September 11, is tearing away at

the fabric of the international community.

Although America's military supremacy will remain uncontested for decades to come, this fundamental change in the perception of U.S. power and purpose will quietly erode America's unipolar moment. Many countries are now distancing themselves from the United States, expediting the transition to a world of multiple centers of power. The return of a multipolar landscape will reawaken the competitive instincts that have been held in abeyance by U.S. primacy. Preparing for this transition is one of the central challenges facing the global community.

Although many analysts would agree that the current strains in transatlantic relations are the most serious since World War II, they see this state of affairs as temporary, a passing idiosyncrasy of the Bush administration. This is, however, a dangerous illusion. Beneath their surface, the international system is in the midst of profound and irreversible change.

The rise of a more self-confident and assertive Europe is one of the key engines of this change. The EU's collective wealth is drawing equal with that of the United States, and the euro has been steadily gaining ground against the dollar. As investors shift their holdings into euro-denominated assets, America's heavy dependence on inflows of foreign capital could become a major source of economic vulnerability.

Europe's gradual emergence as an alternative center of power is not just economic in nature. EU members are debating the adoption of a constitution and the appointment of a single foreign minister and directly elected chief executive. The EU has replaced the U.S. as the primary diplomatic arbiter in the Balkans and enlargement will enhance the union's influence across Central and Eastern Europe. Europe's newer members are admittedly less enthusiastic than the older ones about the EU's emergence as a counterweight to the United States. But as the Continent's security order inevitably becomes more European and less Atlantic, the Central Europeans will realize that it is in their interests to throw their weight behind a stronger EU.

The EU's efforts to acquire greater military capacity will unquestionably lag far behind its progress on the economic and political front. But there are encouraging signs: France is increasing its defense spending by 20%; Germany appears ready to end conscription in favor of a more capable professional force; in the wake of the fall-out over Iraq, Germany, France, Belgium, and Luxembourg are considering new steps to deepen defense cooperation.

Even under the most optimistic of scenarios, the EU will not challenge America's military primacy anytime soon, if ever. But Europe will become far less reliant on the United States for its security. Its autonomy and its willingness to stand its ground against America will increase. Changes on the other side of the Atlantic are also fundamental in nature. Rather than leading through consensus and working through international institutions, America has embraced a stiff-necked unilateralism. The causes run much deeper than George W. Bush.

Unilateralism is very much a part of America's political culture and its preoccupation with liberty and sovereignty. In the absence of the Cold War threat, which bound America to allies and international institutions, this libertarian tradition is reasserting itself. The American heartland, the fastest growing part of the country, favors such

populist proclivities. And September 11 has altered America's electoral landscape for many years to come, making it politically perilous to challenge the hawks.

The defining geopolitical development of this decade thus promises to be the separation of a rising Europe and a difficult America, leading to a West divided against itself. As the Atlantic Alliance expires, the EU and the United States are unlikely to become adversaries, but they are destined to become competitors across the board. The world will not be bipolar because of Europe's military inferiority, but neither will it be unipolar as the EU more frequently holds it own against America.

As the second decade of this century unfolds, the geopolitical axis is likely to shift to the Pacific, with China gradually emerging as a world-class economic power, perhaps with a military to match. Japan will eventually climb out of recession, adding to Asia's rise. A multipolar world thus looms on the horizon. This century will not belong to America, Europe, or East Asia, it will belong to no one.

The world is thus entering an era of geopolitical transformation, not one of continued U.S. hegemony. Transitions in the international system have always been fraught with danger, hence the urgent need to recognize that change is afoot and map out a strategy for managing it peacefully.

An effective strategy for dealing with the challenges ahead has three critical ingredients. First, Americans must rediscover that multilateralism has at least some merits. Otherwise, the international system will collapse as America and Europe head for a nasty divorce rather than an amicable separation. Perhaps voices of reason will eventually make themselves heard in the United States, even amid a politics still tinged with anxiety about terrorism. If such self-correcting mechanisms fail to operate, then it will be up to others, Europeans in particular, to restrain America.

A Europe that redoubles efforts to build a union capable of acting collectively on the international stage is the second key ingredient of a new strategy. The EU is currently in a no-man's-land. It is too strong to be America's lackey, but too weak and divided to be either an effective partner or a formidable counterweight, inviting Washington's disdain. If the United States faces a strong and coherent EU, however, it will at least have the option of eventually striking a more balanced and mature partnership with Europe. The EU, whether or not America has the good sense to rekindle multilateralism, will at least emerge as a responsible center of power helping to anchor an uncertain world.

Collective efforts to integrate China and other developing regions into global markets and institutions are the final ingredient of a strategy for managing the return to multipolarity. Doing so will help ensure that China aligns its power with rather than against Europe and America. It will also alleviate the underlying conditions that lead to instability, arms proliferation, and terrorism. This task is an onerous one, underscoring the ultimate need for a tamed America and a collective Europe to approach it together.