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One year on: lessons from Iraq

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Underlying the American decision to go to war in Afghanistan and Iraq was a neo-conservative credo professed in the Anglo-American world by the likes of Robert Kagan, William Kristol and Charles Krauthammer. It goes as follows: in the unipolar world of the post-Cold War era, the United States possesses predominant military power, which can be used cost-effectively to capture terrorists, reshape alliances, and, above all, spread democracy. Like any country enjoying a preponderance of military power, the United States has a tendency and a responsibility to use it. Multilateral institutions are useful only in so far as they compliment these geopolitical realities.

Europe, so the argument continues, can wield little global influence outside of its own peaceful Kantian 'paradise'.¹ The only chance for Europe to wield influence is to imitate the United States and build up a substantial military force. Conservatives encourage the Europeans to do this through NATO, fearing that the EU will become a military rival. Most Europeans also advocate a military build-up – rather paradoxically, since few consider themselves neo-conservatives. Laurent Fabius, the former French Prime Minister, believes that the lesson of Iraq is that Europe 'was unable to make its voice heard in the US because it was divided and lacked a unified defence'.²

Events of the past three years have tested this neo-conservative doctrine. And what have we learned? One basic premise – the predominance of US military power, and the resulting temptation to use it – has proven quite correct. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the US prevailed militarily. Yet despite its pre-eminence in classical military matters, the United States is increasingly frustrated abroad. Few lessons of the past two years are agreed by everyone, but one is: 'It is harder to wage peace than to wage war'. The fiscal, military, political and diplomatic costs of using military force are far higher than anyone imagined. In the words of Harvard University President and former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers: 'The

1. Robert Kagan, 'Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order' (New York: Knopf, 2003).

2. Cited in Andrew Moravcsik, 'How Europe can Win without an Army,' *Financial Times*, 3 April 2003. All cited publications by the present author are available at www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~moravcs/

central paradox confronting the United States is this: American power is at its zenith and American influence is at its nadir.³

This is the basic perspective from which I will consider the lessons we might learn from recent world politics in five areas: fighting terrorism, managing the Greater Middle East, the European Union's role as a global actor, transatlantic relations and the nature of the international system.

The war on terrorism

Military responses to terrorism, while sometimes necessary, are insufficient. Most agree that intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 was legitimate and, in the short term, effective. The level of sustained Western cooperation in Afghanistan – as in the first Gulf War, which was similarly viewed as a legitimate response to aggression – remains higher than in any other Western 'out-of-area' action since the end of the Second World War. In Iraq, however, the rhetorical equation of combating al-Qaeda terrorism, countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and promoting human rights behind US unilateral pre-emption now seems expensive, divisive, ineffective and inaccurate.

The splashy capture of Saddam Hussein cannot belie the fact that terrorist activity directed at the United States in Iraq and elsewhere has increased. US occupation of Iraq has re-energised recruiting of terrorists, and the country itself has become a magnet for terrorists using increasingly high concentrations of explosives. In a year since the start of the war the combined total of American dead (around 500) and Iraqi dead (uncounted but surely many times that) surpass the number who died on 9/11. Should the United States achieve anything short of a successful transition to stable democracy in Iraq – a possibility that appears distant and unlikely – it is likely to leave a failed or fragmented state behind. Such states (e.g. Lebanon, Afghanistan, Somalia) are the primary breeding grounds for global terrorism. The demonstration effect of Iraq on potential proliferators like North Korea, Iran and Libya remains unclear, but surely it is not the only force for accommodation. So it is hard to conclude that the war in Iraq, as opposed to the war in Afghanistan, has done much to support the war on terrorism.

3. Lawrence H. Summers, 'Europe and America in the 21st century', Lecture at London School of Economics, London, 13 November 2003; available at: <http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2003/lse.html>.

The Greater Middle East

With the collapse of arguments based on non-proliferation or terrorism, the assurance of a peaceful transformation of Iraq to democracy – and the long-term democratic transformation of the Middle East – has become the primary justification for war in Iraq. Many have noted the irony: an Administration that came into office priding itself on its realist rejection of the quixotic nation-building associated with the Democratic party is now cast in the role of the Wilsonian idealist.

Trumpeting human rights and democracy makes for compelling domestic political rhetoric. So it is hardly surprising that the contention that Saddam Hussein is a ‘bad guy’, and that we would all be better off if Iraq were a democracy, has garnered considerable support among those in the liberal centre of the American political spectrum. Yet eventually one must deliver on the ground.

The failure to do so is, in part, a sad testament to the bureaucratic politics of the Bush administration. We now know that the US government belief that such a project of reform could easily be achieved rested on inadequate, indeed *deliberately* inadequate, pre-war planning.⁴ This overconfidence stemmed above all from a quite conscious ideological construction of world politics trumpeted by David Flum, Richard Perle and others as the true lesson of Iraq.⁵ As Prof. John Mearsheimer has observed, the Bush administration aim of democratising the Middle East is grounded in the assumption that Islamic militants hate us *for what we are*.⁶ If one holds this view, then the only solution is to *make them like us* – that is, a Wilsonian sort of imperialism aimed at democratising the Middle East, by force if necessary, and re-educating its populace. The underlying premise of the Bush policy lies in a ‘clash of civilisations’.⁷ Once one takes this extreme view, US policy failure becomes a difficult thing to explain, and the search for scapegoats follows. Some centrist supporters of the war, such as Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, are now compelled to explain its failure by criticising European allies more vociferously than does the Administration – as if the absence of another 30,000 European troops were the real problem in Iraq.

Soberer analysis, according to Mearsheimer, reveals that the tension between the West (particularly the United States) and

4. James Fallows, ‘Blind into Baghdad’, *Atlantic Monthly*, January-February 2004; available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2004/01/media-preview/fallows.htm>.

5. David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003).

6. John Mearsheimer, ‘The Role of Containment in the Post-Cold War World’, Conference for the George Kennan Centennial, Princeton University, February 2004.

7. This despite the fact that Samuel Huntington, who coined the phrase, has been notable in his unwillingness to publicly support the war in Iraq.

most members of the Islamic world is not primarily about what the West or Islam *is*, but *what each side has done*. They hate us not because of who we are, but *because of our policies*. It is the stationing of US troops in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, traditional US support for repressive regimes in the region, regular US intervention in the Middle East over half a century, US oil interests and perceived US support for an apparently neo-colonialist policy of the current Israeli government in the West Bank that triggers strong Islamic antipathy. This explains why the United States, Israel and moderate Arab states, but not the countries of Western Europe and Japan, are the target of Islamic terrorism. If so, then the US goal – an easier goal to achieve, all things considered – ought to be to extricate itself delicately from such controversial diplomatic and military commitments in the region. On balance, the Iraq crisis – and particularly the current, albeit easily foreseeable, fear of the Bush administration with regard to democratising Iraq – suggests that the latter view has merit.

Yet the difficulty of reconstruction and reform in Iraq also highlights, above all, a fundamental weakness of the United States that is independent of the party in power. In contrast to its swift and effective military establishment, the US foreign policy apparatus finds it extremely difficult to deploy effective ‘civilian power’ in world politics. Limited by Congress, the United States provides relatively modest amounts of civilian foreign aid, as a percentage of GDP, with aid heavily concentrated on a few strategic countries. It also provides it, studies show, in a remarkably inefficient manner, in large part due to its wariness of multilateral institutions and the related tendency to impose parochial political conditions. US processes of trade policy-making are similarly constrained by cumbersome checks and balances. When President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, the linchpin of US strategy in the region, recently arrived in Washington and asked, above all, for one key type of political assistance, a modest textile quota, President Bush rebuffed him outright. He had to, because electoral and Congressional politics demanded it. The US defence establishment resists peacekeeping missions, leading to the outsourcing of police duties referred to by critics as ‘imperialism lite’. The United States finds it relatively difficult to share intelligence and influence with, let alone trust and bolster, international monitoring efforts. And, above all, the United States has wilfully manoeuvred itself into a

position where it cannot credibly employ international institutions to legitimate and muster support for its policies.

Were the US government to swiftly embrace the view that it is US policies, not the essence of Western identity, that engender hostility in the Islamic world, and recognise its own weaknesses in manipulating civilian power, it would at a stroke create the basis for steady Western cooperation to manage the Middle East. Such cooperation would bring Americans and Europeans together. This raises the question of the EU's role in such cooperation, to which we now turn.

The European Union's role as a global actor

European policy during the year preceding Iraq was characterised by a remarkable lack of seriousness. No European government devoted even modest financial or political capital to the construction of a realistic policy alternative to a US invasion. 'Old European' policy remained almost entirely rhetorical. Moving forward, the nagging question remains: how is the West to combat terrorism, proliferation and Islamic extremism? If Europe is to eschew regional isolation and step into a global role, it must choose among – or a mix among – two options: a European military build-up and the further development of 'civilian power'.⁸

The policy response most widely advocated on both sides of the Atlantic is to establish a more unified European military with the sort of high-intensity capabilities employed by NATO in Kosovo. Such a force would, it is argued, make Europe self-sufficient in dealing with immediate security threats, project European power abroad, provide respectable support for the United States, bolster European pride, and increase European influence with the United States. Depending on their politics and political culture, European commentators differ on whether such power should be deployed inside or outside of NATO, and on whether, more broadly, it should be deployed as an adjunct, alternative or counterweight to US power – but there is remarkable agreement in Europe that something should be done to increase Europe's military power vis-à-vis the United States.

No doubt an EU military wing would make for 'feel-good' politics in Europe. European publics will feel that something is being

8. For a more detailed exposition, see Andrew Moravcsik, 'Striking a New Transatlantic Bargain', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2003.

done to balance unipolar America. The French, British and Germans could all stay on board, as Gerhard Schröder, Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac and Javier Solana could push their candidates (or themselves) for the job of future EU 'foreign minister'.

As a serious strategy for global influence, however, a European military build-up would do nothing to alter US-European relations or transform the Middle East. It is unlikely that Europeans will spend the money, or approve the wrenching industrial and political upheavals, necessary to create a serious high-intensity force. Nor are they likely to agree on conditions for its use. Even if the fiscal and political barriers were overcome, the force would have few if any plausible scenarios for autonomous action. The future Yugoslavia's will be in Chechnya, Algeria, Morocco, Iran or Pakistan – unsavoury spots for intervention, particularly without American back-up. And even if deployed somewhere, such a force would have no impact on US policy. The US military does not want or need high-intensity assistance. The United States does desire peacekeepers, but the Europeans already possess more than they are prepared to use.

Even more importantly, militarisation betrays European ideals and interests. Over the past year, European governments and publics have argued passionately that the US preference for hyper-military responses to terrorist threats has been short-sighted and ineffectual. European critics reject Kagan's celebrated but anachronistically narrow concept of international power, whereby the citizens of military superpowers are admirable Martians and all others parochial Venusians. Such objections are deeply grounded in an admirable European idealism about the potential efficacy of non-military foreign policy instruments. And yet now, after Washington both ignored and confirmed European warnings by invading Iraq without clear multilateral support and plummeting into a quagmire of nation-building, Europeans are hankering for a larger army. Kagan must be pleased: he has converted a continent!

Underlying it all, the real problem is that European defence schemes distract Europe from its true comparative advantage in world politics: the cultivation of civilian and quasi-military power. Europe is the 'Quiet Superpower': it possesses five instruments that, taken in total, constitute an influence over peace and war as great as that of the United States.

First, *trade policy*. EU accession is perhaps the single most powerful policy instrument for peace and security in the world today. In 10-15 potential member states, authoritarian, intolerant or corrupt governments have recently lost elections to democratic, market-oriented coalitions held together by the promise of eventual EU membership. This is a decade-long record of democratisation that the United States, with all its military might, cannot match. This could be replicated in Turkey through EU accession and elsewhere through assertive use of trade arrangements, since the EU is the major trading partner of every country in the Middle East, including Israel.

Second, *aid*. Europeans provide more than 70 per cent of all civilian development assistance in the world today. This is four times more than the United States contributes and is far more equitably and efficiently disbursed, often by multilateral organisations. When the shooting stops in Palestine, Kosovo, Afghanistan, it is the Europeans who are called on to rebuild, reconstruct and reform.

Third, *peacekeeping and policing*. European troops, generally under multilateral auspices, help keep the peace in trouble spots as disparate as Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Afghanistan. EU members and applicants contribute ten times as many peacekeeping troops as the United States. The aftermath in Iraq shows how costly peacekeeping can be: it has sapped US military capability and undermined public support for internationalist policies.

Fourth, *monitoring by international institutions*. International inspections, supported by Europe, can help build the global trust that is needed to manage serious crises. The Iraq crisis might have developed very differently if the Europeans had cared enough to offer the option of sending, say, ten times as many weapons inspectors to Iraq, ten months earlier.

Last, *multilateral legitimation*. In the world today, multilateral legitimacy is the basis of 'soft power' – the power to attract rather than compel.⁹ The Iraq crisis has demonstrated the extraordinary effect of multilateral institutions on global opinion. In country after country, polls have shown that a second United Nations Security Council resolution would have given public opinion a 30-40 per cent swing in favour of military action. In countries like Chile, Mexico and, above all, Turkey, failure to pass a second resolution was decisive in undermining support for the United States.

9. Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Washington: PublicAffairs, 2004).

Trade, aid, peacekeeping, monitoring and multilateral legitimisation are Europe's real sources of global influence. Even modest progress on difficult civilian tasks – like tightening ties with Turkey, developing EU flexibility on the Israeli-Palestinian question, establishing a multinational coercive inspection force for WMD, or cutting agricultural subsidies – would do more, euro-for-euro, to promote world peace and security than construction of a 'Euro-force'. They would also do more for European integration. Whereas the EU's involvement in defence policy is minor, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, no one can deny its powerful, sometimes predominant, role in managing trade, aid, and European policy toward multilateral organisations.

Transatlantic relations

What does this mean for the transatlantic alliance? Any successful alliance must be built on the basis of *complementarity* – that is, a division of labour based on comparative advantage.¹⁰ The central policy issue is how to make such specialisation satisfactory for each partner and efficient for the alliance as a whole. The European comparative advantage – and its only hope of influence with the United States – is to provide what the United States does not have, namely assertive and efficient civilian power. Rather than carping about US military power, or hankering after it, Europe would do better to invest its political and budgetary capital in a distinctive complement to it.

Many Europeans worry that in a Western alliance where the United States is the dominant military partner and Europe the dominant civilian partner, they will be disadvantaged. How often one hears the homily: 'American does the cooking, and Europe does the cleaning'. Yet this metaphor is misleading. In fact, a European focus on civilian and low-intensity military power would strengthen Europe's influence vis-à-vis the United States – and thereby strengthen the Western alliance. Were European countries, singly or collectively, to explicitly condition their provision of civilian power – trade, aid, peacekeepers, monitoring and multilateral legitimacy – on US self-restraint, Europe might get its way more often, and without a bigger army. This would be good for the

10. For an elaboration, see Moravcsik, *op. cit.* in note 7.

West and the world as well, for without trade, aid, peacekeeping, monitoring and legitimacy, no amount of unilateral military can stabilise an unruly world.

The international system

My years of government service are behind me, and I am now a professor of political science. Thus it is fitting that I close not with a *tour d'horizon* of major global issues, but by reflecting on what the foregoing analysis of last two years in world politics teaches us about world politics in general. The lesson is clear: military pre-eminence does not have the decisive positive impact on global politics that neo-conservatives ascribe to it. It is far more costly to enforce a *Pax Americana* than to wage war American-style. In fiscal terms, even the current inadequate commitment is costly. The West is relearning the lesson learned in the process of decolonisation half a century ago, namely that military force alone cannot create stable government and trusty allies in the developing world. The use of non-military power resources like trade, aid, peacekeeping, monitoring and multilateral legitimation was critical to Western victory in the Cold War – and it is all the more true with respect to current threats posed by terrorism, WMD, and rogue states.¹¹ Any viable Western strategy must be grounded in this fundamental premise.

11. Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Washington: PublicAffairs, 2004).