

War on Terror

A Mission Impossible

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The military and political problems of United States and coalition policy in Afghanistan and Iraq are causing fresh uncertainty and dispute in Western capitals. This short-term concern, however, must be seen against the background of the entire war on terror – and the American unilateralism that propelled it – since its launch in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001.

In the months before 9/11, the neo-conservative euphoria in Washington was already at its height. George W Bush had been in the White House since January 2001 and the administration was developing a clear unilateralist agenda in pursuit of the 'new American century'. This was apparent in its attitude to international agreements: there was no chance of the United States ratifying the comprehensive test ban treaty (CTBT); opposition to the strengthening of the biological and toxin weapons convention (BTWC) and plans for an agreement to prevent the weaponisation of space; determination to avoid joining the International Criminal Court (ICC); and near-certainty that the US would withdraw from the 1972 anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty. In this context, the US's sudden withdrawal from the Kyoto climate-change protocol – though it was most surprising to many European governments – was quite consistent with this overall approach.

The power and influence of the neo-conservatives in the new administration mean that all these developments should have been expected. One of the most readable of the neocon commentators, Charles Krauthammer, put it very plainly in an article published just three months before 9/11:

'Multipolarity, yes, when there is no alternative. But not when there is. Not when we have the unique imbalance of power that we enjoy today – and that has given the international system a stability and essential tranquility that it had not known for at least a century.

The international environment is far more

likely to enjoy peace under a single hegemon. Moreover, we are not just any hegemon. We run a uniquely benign imperium.' (see 'The Bush Doctrine: ABM, Kyoto and the New American Unilateralism', *Weekly Standard*, 4 June 2001).

In light of this outlook and its influence at the time, it is hardly a surprise that the shock of the 9/11 attacks resulted in a massive military response, immediately in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. Some commentators advocated another approach – intense international cooperation to bring the Al Qaeda leadership to justice, however long it might take, at the same time as warning against an immediate recourse to regime termination (see, for example, my openDemocracy article 'Afghanistan: the problem with military action', 26 September 2001).

There were other voices, especially from the majority world, that sought a more fundamental change in policy. Walden Bello's is a notable example – writing in late September 2001, he condemned the attacks unreservedly but warned against a heavy military response. Instead, he called for a radical change in outlook:

'The only response that will really contribute to global security and peace is for Washington to address not the symptoms of terrorism. It is for the United States to re-examine and substantially change its policies in the Middle East and the Third World, supporting a change in arrangements that will not stand in the way of the achievement of equity, justice and genuine national sovereignty for currently marginalized peoples. Any other way leads to endless war' (see 'Endless War?', *Focus on the Global South*, September 2001).

Such a change would not come from the Bush administration; as a result, the world is now into the seventh year of the 'long war'. From this distance and in view of all that has happened in these years, Bello's prognosis looks uncomfortably accurate. Moreover, the United States and its small band of coalition states is mired in Iraq, and a larger if unhappy coalition anticipates years of conflict in Afghanistan.

The true path

It is still just possible that there will be some US troop withdrawals from Iraq in 2008, though the chances are becoming remote. In any case, any drawdown will do no more than take the numbers to the levels of 2003-06 – before the start of the 2007 surge. Meanwhile the United States is consolidating its influence over Iraq's political and economic life while developing several massive military bases and pulling in more air power to maintain control (see my openDemocracy article 'The Iraq project', 31 January 2008). Unless there is a quite extraordinary change in policy, the United States will be in Iraq for very many years to come; the importance of the region's oil resources alone helps ensure that.

In Afghanistan, there is considerable disunity among Nato member-states. The flurry of diplomatic activity – including US defence secretary Robert M Gates's criticism of Nato allies, and the visit of US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and Britain's foreign secretary David Miliband to Kabul on 7 February – reflects the extent and immediacy of concern about the problems they are facing (see Ann Scott

Tyson & Josh White, 'Gates Hits Nato Allies' Role in Afghanistan', *Washington Post*, 7 February 2008). Gordon Brown's government is seen as the key ally at present and there is concern in Washington that London may find public opinion turning against British involvement in Afghanistan. Britain has by far the largest involvement of any of Nato's European member-states; on 6 February, its defence minister Des Browne announced that most of the élite Parachute regiment would be deployed to Helmand province for the period of April-October 2008.

For the United States this continuing involvement is crucial, but it is still not enough – given the reluctance of many Nato states to put their own troops on the frontline. The Pentagon declared its intention on 15 January 2008 to add 3,200 marines to its own forces in the country, but there are calls for much larger increases. One of Washington's leading conservative think-tanks, the American Enterprise Institute, was a key instigator of the 2007 surge in Iraq; it now wants a similar surge in Afghanistan involving the immediate transfer there of another three combat brigades. Along with support troops and the extra marines already assigned, this would take the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan to around 70,000; it would also involve substantial reinforcements of air power.

A calculation of the current force levels in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the large contingents of private-security contractors included, suggests that there will soon be close to 250,000 foreign military personnel occupying the two countries; and they are backed up by almost as many private civilian employees.

The term 'occupying' and 'occupation' are not in the vocabulary of the White House or 10 Downing Street: from their perspective what is happening is a major security operation to win the war on terror while bringing two key countries safely into the Western orbit. There may be civilian casualties and many other problems but the entire endeavour is, in this perspective, essentially benign – a right and proper response from the civilised countries of the North Atlantic to the appalling atrocity of 11 September 2001.

Krauthammer's 'benign imperium' may look a little tattered around the edges but it remains the basis for coalition action (see my 'US unilateralism – alive and kicking?', 23 January 2002). The fact that some countries within Nato may no longer be fully committed is both sad and annoying, but they cannot be allowed to deter American leadership from the true and correct path.

The blind eye

The problem is twofold. First, most of the world simply does not see things this way. This does not mean that the majority world supports Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda movement. True, many more people do so now than before 9/11, but this is not the real significance of what has happened. What has really changed is that the occupation of countries in the Islamic world by Western military forces is simply not feasible. The claims that they are peacekeepers or stabilisers is regarded as untenable by many who point to the many thousands of civilians who have been and are being killed each year, and the tens of thousands of people detained without trial.

Second, the United States-led approach is just not working. It may not have been right for the European colonial powers of recent centuries to occupy much of the world, but it was politically possible for them to do so. Now – although the truth is taking a long time to be recognised – the world is in a very different age. Two changes in particular are decisive. The first is that the world's media (not least in the Arab and Muslim worlds) has opened up and diversified with astonishing rapidity. In little more than a decade, twenty-four-hour TV news channels have taken to the air, offering fresh perspectives and graphic accounts of the occupations. Moreover, the web, broadband, cell-phones and many other communications systems have further added to the range of information available, often including overt and hard-hitting propaganda.

The second change is that asymmetric warfare – especially the ability of the weak to take up arms against the strong – means that the world's most powerful states can no longer maintain control (see my *Losing Control: Global Security in the 21st Century*, Pluto Press, [second edition], 2002). In the fiscal year 2009, the US military budget will be the largest in real terms since the Second World War – exceeding expenditure at the time of the Korean war (1950-53), the Vietnam war (1965-75), or at the height of the Cold War. It will also be larger than that of every other country put together, even excluding direct war costs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet even with all this, and a belief in the rightness of its cause, the reality is that the United States cannot continue – militarily, financially, or politically – to occupy countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan for years to come. The problems are widely recognised and many liberal think-tanks and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic now advocate partial withdrawals from both countries. The latter may have the best of motives, but perhaps they too have not recognised what has changed.

The occupation of countries in the Middle East and South-West Asia by Western military forces is no longer politically feasible. The starting-point for any new policy will have to be complete withdrawal. Any other approach has been rendered obsolete by the cumulative effects of the last six years. That thought is at present beyond Washington and London's reach, but it is a reality that one day they will simply have to face.

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