

# Iraq, the United States, and the end of the European coalition

*Gabriel Kolko*

We are experiencing the equivalent of a geopolitical earthquake.

The disintegration of the Soviet bloc permitted American unilateralism on a scale the modern world has never seen. But with its war against Iraq the United States for the first time openly massed its military power and then invaded another nation, justifying the war in the name of the elimination of weapons of mass destruction and 'regime change.' At the same time, it staked the very future of its existing alliances – NATO above all – but also the United Nations. NATO's demise is a major outcome of the war against Iraq. Washington wished to recast its European alliance, especially after its war against Serbia in the spring of 1999 revealed that the NATO principle of unanimity among its 19 members was a major inhibition on its freedom of action, but today its European coalition is disintegrating prematurely for reasons it both failed to anticipate and deplores. America's unilateralism and bellicosity has compelled some of the most important European nations to assert their independence well before they were ready or likely to do so.

Washington intended that NATO, from its very inception, serve as its instrument for maintaining its political hegemony over Western Europe, forestalling the emergence of a bloc that could play an independent role in world affairs. Charles de Gaulle, Winston Churchill, and many influential politicians envisioned such an alliance less as a means of confronting the Soviet army than as a way of containing a resurgent Germany as well as balancing American power.

Publicly, the reason for creating NATO in 1949 was the alleged Soviet military menace, but the United States always planned to employ strategic nuclear weapons to defeat the USSR – for which it did not need an alliance. But Washington believed that war with Russia was not imminent or even likely, a view that

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prevailed most of the time until the USSR finally disappeared. There was also the justification of preventing the Western Europeans from being obsessed with fear at reconstructing Germany's economy, and American military planners were concerned with internal subversion. But when the Soviet Union capsized over a decade ago, NATO's nominal rationale for existence died with it. But the principal reason for its creation – to forestall European autonomy – remains.

NATO provided a peacekeeping force in Bosnia to enforce the agreement that ended the internecine civil war in that part of Yugoslavia, but in 1999 it ceased being a purely defensive alliance and entered the war against the Serbs on behalf of the Albanians in Kosovo. The United States found the entire experience very frustrating. Targets had to be approved by all 19 members, any one of which could veto American proposals. The Pentagon's after-action report of October 1999 conceded that America needed the cooperation of NATO countries, but 'gaining consensus among 19 democratic nations is not easy and can only be achieved through discussion and compromise.' But Wesley Clark, the American who was NATO's supreme commander, regarded the whole experience as a nightmare – both in his relations with the Pentagon and NATO's members. '[W]orking within the NATO alliance,' American generals complained, 'unduly constrained US military forces from getting the job done quickly and effectively.'<sup>1</sup> A war expected to last a few days instead took 78 days. The Yugoslav war taught the Americans a grave lesson.

Long before September 11, 2001, Washington was determined to avoid the serious constraints that NATO could impose. However much their premises differ, Bush's closest advisers all believe in an apocalyptic world. Some, such as Vice-president Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, are nationalists who believe America has overwhelming military power and should apply it. Others, such as Paul Wolfowitz, are neo-conservative ideologues, mainly Jewish academics and lawyers capable of articulating elegant Hobbesian justifications for the use of power – and wars; many are personally close to Israel's ruling Likud party. Their focus is mainly on altering fundamentally Middle Eastern politics to provide Israel a friendly geopolitical environment. Yet others, including the president, are born-again Christians who sincerely believe the United States has a divine mission to reorder the world. The White House has little patience with the increasingly impotent 'realists' and believers in traditional diplomacy in the State Department, much less those in the Central Intelligence Agency who believe that objective intelligence should influence foreign and military policies. Combined, this is an exceedingly dangerous intellectual cocktail to guide the most powerful nation on earth; its analytic basis for the application of power is highly romantic and dangerously irresponsible. Most of America's leaders are suspicious of foreigners, not just former enemies like Russia and China but also the major NATO allies, and they are quick – often nonchalant – to create adversarial situations with nations that criticise their blustering style in any way.

It is really quite misleading to concentrate exclusively on the systematic ideas

and strategies of Bush's coterie, for the United States since at least 1949 has wanted military dominance, control over oil (principally at the expense of its British 'allies'), and the like – power in the largest geo-political sense. The errors built into this overweening ambition, from military 'credibility' to an ignorance of the political nuances and complexities of the nations the United States has sought to control, are many decades old. Like most persons who rise to the top in Washington, articulating great strategic designs comes easily to many of them. The real question is not systematic theories but the unintended consequences of grandiose, unrealistic ambitions and the loss of control over priorities: allies and proxies who collapse, as in the case of Thieu in Vietnam or the Shah in Iran, or become enemies – as with the Muslim fundamentalists in Afghanistan or Hussein in Iraq. For America always loses control of its priorities, especially insofar as the major regions of the world are concerned, and its grand plans have invariably fallen apart and frustrated.

This confusion and loss of priorities is best illustrated by the shifting importance of Asia in Washington's priorities. When the Bush Administration took power at the beginning of 2001 it was committed to a much more activist foreign policy in East Asia, and was especially resolved to confront China. Until September 11 China was the threat of choice to most of official Washington, a potential enemy big enough to justify the Pentagon's extravagant spending. The crash of an American spy plane with a Chinese fighter over Hainan island in April 2001 gave force to the imminent administration designation of China as the leading 'peer competitor' to the United States. September 11 changed everything, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have completely altered America's priorities. China is no longer of prime importance to it, and even North Korea's nuclear bombs remain a question it wavers on, and it is a challenge it is loath to confront soon because it lacks the military resources – it is spread far too thinly throughout the world. The war in Afghanistan destabilized the Musharraf regime in Pakistan, and South Asia with it – future relations between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan are more unpredictable than ever. As for the Western Hemisphere, which is essentially outside of the leading decision makers' vision, Washington has neglected and thereby alienated Mexico and Canada – its two neighbours and major trading partners – to an extent which was completely unintended.

One may look at America's resolve over the past two years and ultra-sophisticated military equipment as a sign of strength as well as imperialist pretension, but it is also an indication of endemic confusion and a policy that will unintentionally lead to the diffusion of its power – and create more weakness for it. This is the history of its improvised and often chaotic behaviour since 1945.

The people who lead the United States today do not think in these terms, because priorities and their systematic application imply constraints and a recognition of the limits of power, if only to exploit its formidable resources more rationally. For these men, the only question over the past several years was of timing and how the United States would escape NATO's clear military

obligations while maintaining its political hegemony over its members. They still want to preserve NATO for the very reason it was established: to keep Europe from developing an independent political as well as military organisation. Some of its members want NATO to reach a partial accord with Russia, a relationship on which Washington often shifted, but Moscow remains highly suspicious of its plans to extend its membership to Russia's very borders. When the new administration came to power in January 2001, NATO's fundamental role was already being reconsidered. What it did add – at least as much out of ineptness as conscious policy – was a readiness to smash the alliance if necessary. For apart from their penchant for action, which in itself is scarcely unique, its spokesmen have a completely incompetent sense of public relations, creating shock and opposition among friends as well as enemies – and resistance to America's objectives well before it might otherwise occur. Although it would eventually have happened anyway, NATO's demise is a good example of this policy based on blunders whose unintended consequences then become decisive.

President Bush is strongly unilateralist, and he repudiated the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, opposes further restrictions on nuclear weapons tests or land mines, and is against a host of other existing and projected accords. He also greatly accelerated the development of an anti-ballistic missile system, which will give the United States a first-strike capacity and which China and Russia justifiably regard as destabilising – thereby threatening to renew the nuclear arms race. Downgrading the United Nations, needless to say, was axiomatic. The war in Afghanistan was fought without NATO but on the United States' terms by a 'floating' coalition 'of the willing,' a model for future conflicts 'that will,' according to Rumsfeld, 'evolve and change over time depending on the activity and circumstances of the country.' It accepted the small German, French, Italian, and other contingents that were offered only after it became clear that the war, and especially its aftermath, would take considerably longer than the Pentagon expected. But it did not consult them on military matters or crucial political questions.

Despite its military success, the Afghan war was a political failure for the United States. The country is today ruled by warlords, its economy is in a shambles, and even the Taliban is again attracting followers. The United States has never been able to translate its superior arms into political success, and that decisive failure is inherent in everything it attempts. Iraq is very likely to confirm this pattern; its regionalism and internecine ethnic strife will produce years of instability. Rational assessments of these repeated political failures would lead America to act far less frequently, and its vision consciously excludes alliances that will inhibit its actions.

The war with Iraq is only the first step in the United States' astonishingly ambitious project to recast the world. It has identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as members of an 'axis of evil.' Even today there is growing and formidable pressure on the Bush Administration to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, thereby courting an even broader regional war. But as its 'Nuclear Posture Review' to Congress made clear in January 2002, Syria and Libya are also 'immediate'

dangers, while China and even Russia ‘remain a concern.’ The Iraq war is the beginning of a cycle.<sup>2</sup>

On September 19, 2002 Bush proclaimed the United States’ commitment to fighting ‘pre-emptive’ wars against ‘rogue states’ that have weapons of mass destruction or harbour ‘terrorists.’ His vision extends far beyond the constraints inherent in alliances, much less agreeing to conform to the decisions of the United Nations. This ‘new’ era in international relations, with momentous implications for war and world peace, in fact began long before then, but it was inevitable that the unilateralists now in charge of America’s foreign policy would bring it to its logical conclusion.

Washington has decided that its allies must now accept its objectives and work solely on its terms, and it has no intention whatsoever of discussing the merits of its actions in NATO conferences. This applied, above all, to the war against Iraq – a war of choice.

The United States submitted the Iraq issue to the UN Security Council only because of a vain effort by Secretary of State Colin Powell to stem the unilateralism of the dominant entourage around President Bush, but the entire crisis revealed the impotence of traditionalists in the State Department. The Americans based their case for military action on the alleged existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as well as Hussein’s purported links with Al Qaeda terrorists. But Israeli intelligence reported to the United States that Hussein had no ties whatsoever to Bin Laden. The CIA concurred, and many of its analysts complained publicly that the White House was forcing them to lie on this issue.

As for weapons of mass destruction, the United Nations inspectors did not find any and the CIA was convinced that by 1995 Hussein had few, if any, left. Much more important, he did not use them against the invading American army, which so far has not found any. The single most important US public justification for the Iraq war proved to be an utter falsehood. This catastrophic lie will haunt the United States for years to come, because although it proved in Iraq that it militarily could quickly defeat what was, at best, a second-rate army, it has no political credibility whatsoever. France saw the issue as primarily one of the rule of agreed international law in guiding international affairs of all nations, and regarded American behaviour as both arbitrary and unilateral. To this extent, the Iraq crisis was broader and impinges directly on NATO’s future. The French and German refusal to support what was an obvious American obsession to eliminate a regime that it (and Israel) deplored was vindicated, although the Security Council could not constrain arbitrary and dangerous American action. But it embarked on war anyway. Its real goal was political – regime change – and it is the beginning of a cycle of interventions that may last years; its ultimate consequences are utterly unpredictable.

The crisis in NATO was both overdue and inevitable, the result of a decisive American reorientation, and the time and ostensible reason for it was far less important than the underlying reason it occurred: the United States’ growing realisation after the early 1990s that while NATO was militarily a growing

liability it still remained a political asset. The United Nations and Security Council were strained in ways that proved decisive, but the United States never assigned the UN the same crucial role as it did its alliance in Europe. The Iraq war was the final step in NATO's demise.

Today, NATO's original *raison d'être* for imposing American hegemony – which was to prevent the major European nations from pursuing independent foreign policies – is the core of the controversy that is now raging. Washington cannot sustain this grandiose objective because a reunited Germany is far too powerful to be treated as it was a half-century ago, and Germany has its own interests in the Middle East and Asia to protect. Germany and France's independence was reinforced by wholly inept American propaganda on the relationship of Iraq to Al Qaeda (from which the CIA and British MI6 openly distanced themselves), overwhelming antiwar public opinion in most nations, and a great deal of opposition within the United States establishment and many senior American officers to the war with Iraq. The furious American response to Germany, France, and Belgium's refusal, under article 4 of the NATO treaty, to protect Turkey from an Iraqi counter-attack because that would prejudge the Security Council's decision on war and peace was only a contrived reason for confronting fundamental issues that have simmered for years. The dispute was far more about symbolism than substance, and the point was made: some NATO members refused to allow the organisation to serve as a rubber stamp for American policy, whatever it may be. War in Iraq forced the issue to a head, compelling major NATO members and Russia to resist Washington's leadership. Whether such a split was inevitable is now moot – it happened.

Turkey's problem was simple: the United States pressured it, despite overwhelmingly antiwar Turkish public and political opinion, to allow American troops to invade Iraq from Turkey – in effect, to enter the war on its side. The United States wanted NATO to aid Turkey in order to strengthen the Ankara government's resolve to ignore overwhelmingly antiwar domestic opinion. The arms it was to receive were superfluous. But the Turks have always been far more concerned with Kurdish separatism in Iraq rekindling the civil war that Kurds have fought in Turkey for much of the past decade, and the conditions they demanded on these issues put Washington in a very difficult position from which it could not extricate itself. The United States naively took Turkey for granted, as it has for many decades, tying up its most modern armour division offshore its coast on the assumption it could also invade Iraq from the north. An important faction of the government deliberately protracted negotiations with the United States in the hope of preventing the war altogether.<sup>3</sup>

Turkey's best – and most obvious – defence was to stay out of the war, which the vast majority of Turks wanted. After incessant haggling, it ended up doing so, and its relations with the U.S. are now very strained, perhaps irreparably. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Turkish troops are massed at the Iraq border and they will march if the Kurds keep Kirkuk, declare *de facto* independence, or in some way threaten Turkish interests. A crisis may not occur in the coming weeks,

but it is a constant threat in the future. For the United States it is a nightmare which can easily become reality.

Geopolitically, the consummately ambitious American plan for restructuring the Middle East's politics, making it more congenial to itself as well as to Israel, is very likely to fail. Arab opinion – even among those once friendly to the United States – was overwhelmingly antiwar and passionately angry, a fact that will only increase terrorism's appeals and its dangers to Americans and their allies. The vast majority of Arabs believe that the outcome of the war on Iraq will be instability for the entire region.

There is no longer an Iraqi balance to Iranian predominance in the Gulf region, a fact that has untold geopolitical implications. Saudi Arabia at the end of April asked the United States to abandon its ultra-modern bases quickly, which it has agreed to do, and the Saudis have made a grudging move to make peace with the detested Iranian Shia regime. Washington supported Hussein in his war with Iran throughout the 1980s, providing him credits, intelligence, and vital military support, solely to contain Iran, and now Iraq is incapable of playing that role. Turkey is likely to intervene, one way or another, to control the Kurds in northern Iraq – what may occur there is wholly unpredictable and will be a vital question in the future. But while America will very likely keep a much larger military presence in the region for many years to come, using Iran as an excuse, it cannot oppose the Turks without shattering the illusion of its alliance with it – and NATO. War with Iraq has created a vast number of uncontrollable geopolitical dangers throughout the region.

Iran's role is of overwhelming importance to the United States – and to Israel. It is militarily far more formidable than Iraq and will have nuclear weapons in due course – the timing is much disputed. Iran's principal concern is Israel, its nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and Iran has neither the intention nor the technology to reach beyond it. The obvious solution is to create a nuclear-free zone enforced by international inspection, an option Israel is most unlikely to accept, and in late June Iran reiterated its commitment to a nuclear-weapons-free region. 'The war in Iraq is just the beginning,' former prime minister Shimon Peres said on Israeli television last February. Will the United States 'drain the swamp' in the region, as the neoconservatives advocate, even including Saudi Arabia among the regimes to be toppled?<sup>4</sup> Washington is divided on this specific issue but not on the question of its commitment to an aggressive foreign policy globally. What inhibits it most is Iraq's political chaos, which it may increasingly feel obligated to resolve before it confronts more wayward nations, and the immense costs of the American way of making war – costs its former allies are unwilling to share.

### **The End of Alliances**

America still desires to regain the mastery over Europe it had during the peak of the Cold War but it is also determined not to be bound by European desires – or indeed by the overwhelming European public opposition to the war with Iraq.

Genuine dialogue or consultation with its NATO allies is out of the question. The Bush administration, even more than its predecessors, simply does not believe in it – nor will it accept NATO's formal veto structure; NATO's division on Turkey has nothing to do with it. Washington cannot have it both ways. Its commitment to aggressive unilateralism is the antithesis of an alliance system that involves real consultation. France and Germany are now far too powerful to be treated as obsequious dependents, and the meeting at the end of April between these two nations and Belgium – although still vague in its implications – is an important step in the direction of NATO's breakup and the creation of an autonomous bloc that Washington cannot control. These states also believe in sovereignty, as does every nation which is strong enough to exercise it, and they are now able to insist that the United States both listen to and take their views seriously. It was precisely this danger that the United States sought to forestall when it created NATO over 50 years ago.

The controversy over NATO's future has been exacerbated by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's attacks on 'Old Europe' and the disdain for Germany and France that he and his close adviser, Richard Perle, have repeated. But the underlying problems over the alliance's future have been smouldering for years. Together, the nations that opposed a pre-emptive American war in Iraq and the Middle East – an open-ended, destabilising adventure that is likely to last indefinitely – will influence Europe's future development and role in the world profoundly. Although they do not have armies comparable to the American, they have great and growing economies. If Russia cooperates with them, even only occasionally, they will be much more powerful, and President Putin's support for their position on the war makes that a real possibility.

Eastern European nations may say what Washington wishes on Iraq, but economically they are far more dependent on Germany and those allied with it. When the 15 nations in the European Union met last February 17 their statement on Iraq was far closer to the German-French position than the American, reflecting the anti-war nations' economic clout as well as the response of some pro-war political leaders to the massive anti-war demonstrations that have taken place in Italy, Spain, Britain and the rest of Europe. There is every likelihood that the United States will emerge from this crisis in NATO more belligerent, and more isolated and detested, than ever. NATO will then go the way of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and all of the other defunct American alliances.

The Bush administration does not believe it needs allies save on its own terms, and this erroneous presumption is changing the nature of global power and will lead to the United States being isolated. It is folly to guess the next American move, for the war in Afghanistan also destabilised Pakistan – a nuclear power – and North Korea is high on the President's list of evil states. Given its global ambitions and commitments, the United States may very well be drawn elsewhere, and soon. The men who lead it now are capable of anything. At the present time, the Pentagon is considering creating an American-trained and led



international peacekeeping force wholly independent of the United Nations and NATO. It has already discussed the option with some European and Latin American nations. Such a force would be a major step in reinforcing Washington's unilateralism and eliminate UN and NATO restraints on it. One way or another, however, NATO's importance for the United States will decline.

The world has reached the most dangerous point in recent history, one full of threats of wars and instability unlike anything which prevailed when a Soviet-led bloc existed. The war against Iraq and those very likely to follow it are the logic of United States foreign and military policies, one that assumes it has a near monopoly of power, that emerged first after the collapse of Communism. The Bush administration has brought them to their inevitable culmination.

There should be no doubt that the Cold War geopolitical legacies are ending and a new configuration of nations is in the process of being created. It is a mistake to think that America's quick defeat of the demoralised, corrupt Iraqi regime reflects its new technological military prowess rather than Hussein's political weakness. Rumsfeld wishes to trumpet the strength of the Pentagon's arms but this conclusion is scarcely justified by the facts. Military triumph, in any case, can scarcely be equated with political success – and it is politics that counts most in the long run.

The reality is that the world is increasingly multipolar, economically and technologically, and that the United States' desire to maintain absolute military superiority over the world is a chimera. Russia remains a military superpower, China is becoming one, and the world should have confronted and stopped the proliferation of destructive weaponry 20 years ago. It can only be done, if it is still possible, by international accords and bodies – such as the United Nations – which the United States rejects as a constraint on its power. The United States has no alternative but to accept the world as it is, or prepare for doomsday.

Unfortunately, there is not the slightest indication America will acknowledge the limits of its aspirations. The crisis in NATO and the dissolution of its dominant role in Europe reflects this diffusion of all forms of power and the diminution of American hegemony, which remains far more an unattainable aspiration than a reality.

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