

Iraq, Katrina and US Foreign Policy: Implications for the EU

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I) The winds of change?

Since the re-election of President Bush, American foreign policy has undergone a subtle but noticeable and significant transformation. The hawkish attitude demonstrated by Bush during his first term and his cavalier approach towards alliance-building have been replaced by a toning down of the previously aggressive rhetoric and an attempt to reach out to allies and, in particular, to the EU. This is not to say that in actual substance the foreign policy pursued by Bush during his second term is much different from foreign policy as conducted in his previous term. The overwhelming objective of this administration remains the same since the events of 9/11 and it is to win the Global War on Terror (GWOT), which, in the view of Washington, involves 'staying the course' in Iraq and pursuing democracy-promotion. Reaching out to the Europeans also does not mean that Washington has embraced multilateralism. The unilateralist streak in this administration remains as powerful as before, as indeed recently demonstrated by Ambassador Bolton's proposal for UN reform.

However, at least in the three following aspects, the conduct of foreign policy in Bush's second term of office has altered:

- 1) **Management** - *the balance between ideology and 'professionalism' shifted in favour of the latter after the 2004 elections.*

After the events of 9/11 the neo-conservative agenda gained the upper hand in Washington. Ideologues such as Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Douglas Feith became very influential, whilst professionals such as Brent Scowcroft (National Security Advisor in Bush's father's administration) were sidelined. The centre of foreign policy making moved away from the moderate State Department towards the hawkish Defence Department with vice- President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld emerging as central figures in the process.

In Bush's second term, in contrast, all of the major neo-conservative figures are now gone and whilst Rumsfeld retained his post his influence has been weakened by the Abu-Ghafir scandal and the mistakes he made in Iraq. Foreign policy-making returned to the State Department with the highly-experienced Condoleezza Rice having the President's ear. Number 2 at the State Department is now Robert Zoelick, an old hand at the diplomatic game, and Philip Zelikow – a prominent figure in Bush's father's administration – is now Rice's advisor. Robert Kimmitt – an experienced diplomat and a former Ambassador to Germany – is now Number 2 at the Treasury Department. All of this indicates a waning of ideological fervour and the return of professionalism.

- 2) **Democracy promotion** – *more persuasion, less coercion.*

The rhetorical slogan 'democracy promotion' looms as large on the agenda in Bush's second term as it did in the first. However, after the sobering effects of Iraq, the preferred instruments to achieve this are now a mixture of politico-economic sticks and carrots rather than just military might. This has been evident in the Middle East, in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, but also in the former Soviet Union – in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In fact, in the latter case the US was forced to leave its military bases whilst endeavouring to promote democracy.

Also, whilst 'regime-change' in Iran figured prominently on the agenda of the pre-2004 administration with the military option being widely discussed after what initially seemed to be a successful war in Iraq, this bellicose rhetoric has now waned and there is now no appetite for further military engagement in the Middle East in this administration.

It is worth pointing out in this context that, according to recent German Marshall Fund opinion polls, 'democracy promotion' is now more popular amongst Europeans than Americans.

3) **Attitude towards allies** – *more respect and more effort to maintain alliances.*

There has been an undeniable change in this administration's attitude towards the allies in Europe. During the first six months of his second term, Bush travelled to Europe three times and he became the first US President to officially visit the EU. NATO, which was previously neglected, also looms larger on the US agenda and efforts have been made to breathe new life into the alliance. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in contrast to its first term this administration has ceased to divide the allies and there seems to be a change in favour of a more coherent and stronger EU.

The major question remains: why is this change happening now and how sustainable and genuine is it?

II) Iraq, Katrina and the Crisis of Confidence

The post-2004 evolution of US foreign policy is not motivated by a change in the perception of the outside world and American interests. The underlying ideology of Bush's second presidency is no different than in his first term and as such it is driven first and foremost by the administration's view of the 'war on terror'. What has changed, however, is the assessment of the pragmatic means required to pursue a successful campaign as well as the need to respond to growing domestic criticism regarding the war in Iraq and the US's international involvement. In other words, **the 'can do-ism' of the first term is giving way to a more realistic and sober attitude.**

The campaign in Iraq is going badly – the death toll is mounting, the costs are growing and the public's view of all aspects of Bush's presidency, including the fight against terrorism, is increasingly critical. The deteriorating internal situation in Iraq presents major challenges – insurgency, the loss of the US's credibility and continuing political instability. In these circumstances the EU's involvement, particularly in the civilian aspects of stabilising Iraq, has come to be seen in the US as desirable. Washington would welcome a greater EU role in Iraq but it recognises that it is unlikely. However, it counts on the Europeans to relieve the US's military presence in other parts of the world and in particular in Afghanistan and in the Balkans.

America's overstretch has also changed its attitude towards the EU-3 diplomatic efforts in Iran. The initial reluctance with which the US viewed the EU-3 mission ("let them try to fail so we can tell them "we told you so") gave way to wholehearted acceptance and support. Recently it became clear that in fact the US has come to rely on the EU-3's success and, despite the aggressive noises made by some neo-conservatives, it does not really have any other option. It is now generally accepted in Washington that the Europeans will take the lead in dealing with Iran.

Katrina

Whilst the troubles in Iraq have led to a change in Washington's foreign policy posture, the impact of the Katrina disaster is likely to be even more consequential. It is difficult to overestimate the effect the disaster has had on American politics and on America's perception of itself as well as on the role of the US in the world. For one thing, the disaster has completely dominated the American media leaving almost no space for other news, with scant attention given to world issues (including President Bush's speech at the UN). Instead, the effect of the Katrina debacle has been to focus debates and news coverage on domestic inadequacies in dealing with a disaster of this scale and exposing the weaknesses of the American system. The following issues are emphasised in this process:

- **Inequalities and race** – many, if not most, of those who did not evacuate New Orleans before the disaster hit the city were of low income and black. This group was not only the least mobile but was also living in the lowest parts of the city (below sea level). Whilst it is normally possible to be unaware of or to ignore the existence of ‘poor and black America’ this has not been possible in the aftermath of the disaster, with TV news constantly showing images of abject poverty and dereliction that could have come from a third-world country but which are not associated with the world’s leading superpower.
- **Chaos and the inadequate response of authorities** - It is clear that mistakes were made at all levels in dealing with the disaster. The local government ordered the evacuation too late, the state authorities failed to provide logistics support and the federal government was very slow in organising air-lifts to evacuate people from the Millennium Dome. Most crucially, the co-ordination between the three levels of government as well as between the civilian and military aspects of the operation were very poor. Lastly, the newly created Department of Homeland Security failed its first test.
- **A blow to the prestige of the armed forces and the President** – the inadequacy of the federal response and especially the failure to evacuate early the 20, 000 people trapped in the Millennium Dome have damaged the myth of the invincibility of American armed forces and of the President himself. The emotional words of the city’s mayor who argued that his biggest mistake was to assume that the US Army, which was capable of moving people and equipment within 24 hours to Iraq, should also be able to handle the evacuation of civilians from one part of the US to another within 2-3 days, were replayed several times a day on all main news channels. All of these blunders, as well as the President’s initial resistance to getting involved in dealing with the crisis (in the immediate aftermath of the disaster Bush claimed that crisis-management was in this case the exclusive responsibility of local and state authorities), have affected his personal ratings. As a consequence, the President’s approval ratings fell to 40% (for the first time below 50% and down from 90% after 9/11), 6 out of 10 Americans now say that the President does not share their priorities for the country. The polls have also demonstrated a sharp racial divide, with under 50% of all Americans but over 75% of African-Americans disapproving of the President’s handling of the crisis. In short **the image of George W Bush as a ‘can-do guy’ has been tarnished.**

It is perhaps too early to judge Katrina’s long-term impact on US politics but it is already clear that the disaster has caused a huge crisis of confidence that is likely to spill over into foreign policy. The government’s first reactions indicate scaling down on ambitious projects and shifting the focus towards dealing with more immediate concerns. Significantly here, one of the first responses was to delay or abandon the administration’s two flagship initiatives: the planned overhaul of the social security system and making the 2001 tax cuts permanent. There have also been calls to reduce the numbers of troops in Iraq in response to demands for active-duty troops and National Guard units to maintain order and provide hurricane relief at home. About 8,500 active-duty troops have already been dispatched to the Gulf Coast and about 2,800 soldiers from the Louisiana National Guard were allowed to return from Iraq immediately, in most cases two months ahead of schedule.

The following implications for foreign policy are therefore likely to follow from the Katrina disaster:

- ***The appeal of neo-conservative ideology will wane further.*** An embattled government, dealing with a crisis of confidence and the massive financial implications of the disaster (Congress has already approved a 60 billion USD hurricane relief bill and further costs are expected to follow), will be less interested in ‘democracy promotion’ and increasing the US’s involvement in the Middle East – so far it seems that exactly the opposite is happening. It is also significant that neo-conservative think-tanks (such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation) have begun criticising the government for ‘going soft’ and selling out the conservative agenda in the face of populist demands.
- ***Scaling down the level of international involvements.*** Though this may prove to be an exaggerated perspective, it is argued by some in the US that post-Katrina America will become more ‘Jacksonian’ - avoiding rather than seeking greater involvement abroad. It is

certainly the case that the isolationist faction within the Republican party – which came to endorse Bush's interventionist agenda in the wake of 9/11 – is returning to its previous stance of being deeply critical of the US's involvement in nation-building and democracy-promotion abroad.

- ***A more humble attitude towards the allies.*** Whilst the troubles in Iraq and Afghanistan have already eroded the administration's previous conviction that it 'can do it alone', Katrina will only reinforce this tendency. It is also not insignificant in this context that after its initial sceptical reaction to the EU member states' offer of help in the hurricane relief, the US came to appreciate the extent of the aid supplied by the EU and the efficient way in which it was organised.

III) The evolution of US foreign policy and relations with the EU

The question that emerges in the context of the developments discussed above is the extent to which they affect Washington's perception of the EU. Thinking about the EU is by no means at the forefront of America's concerns at the moment. However, as argued earlier, Iraq, *Katrina* and their economic consequences (rising oil prices) have created a climate in which US's foreign policy is changing with implications for its relations with the EU. Three issues currently dominate America's relations with the EU: the evolution of the EU into a global security actor, dealing with Iran and dealing with China (the latter issue will be addressed in a separate note).

The evolution of the EU into a global power – the traditionally positive attitude of the US administration towards European integration weakened during Bush's first term. This was especially evident during the run-up to the war in Iraq, with Washington attempting to foster divisions within the EU and a number of conservative (and at the time influential) think-tanks arguing that a stronger EU would be detrimental to the US's interests (for example, the 'Heritage Foundation' and the 'American Enterprise Institute'). However, since Bush's re-election Washington has made efforts to demonstrate that its views on European integration have become supportive. Both Condoleezza Rice and President Bush have made a number of utterances to this end and, as mentioned above, Washington embarked on a diplomatic 'charm offensive' in recent months. Furthermore, this new attitude in Washington is more than just rhetorical and has had some tangible political implications – most importantly, tacit support for the European Constitution and refraining from exploiting internal divisions in the EU.

Whilst conservative think-tanks continue to argue in favour of 'disaggregating' the EU and they welcomed the failure of the constitution, they have become somewhat isolated on these points. Washington's official and the mainstream unofficial line is now that a more coherent and globally active EU is in the US's best interest, not least because it would be expected to relieve America of some of its international responsibilities. Such a view was already apparent at the beginning of Bush's second term and it is likely to intensify following the *Katrina* crisis.

However, Washington's support for what it calls a 'stronger Europe' is also mixed with an underlying anxiety and confusion about what that would mean in practice. Most importantly, there is a continuing apprehension in the US regarding the ESDP. Whilst the US welcomes the development of European military capacities and the growth of EU-led missions, US officials continue to stress the primacy of NATO and the importance of the Berlin Plus Framework. There is also a consensus in Washington that the further development of the EU's military planning capacities is not needed or desirable as this would lead to the duplication of NATO's resources.

However, the most common reaction to European developments in the US is simply disinterest and ignorance. Given America's preoccupations with its troubles in Iraq and Afghanistan, the perceived threat from Iran and the growing Chinese challenge, the failure of the EU constitution was not widely commented upon in the US. The EU constitution was supported by the administration not because of its content (largely unknown in the US) but as a demonstration of 'goodwill' towards the allies. Such an attitude is likely to prevail even more strongly now when the US is experiencing domestic crisis.

Iran - Washington has been impressed with the EU-3's ability to stick to its line and reject pressure from Tehran to recognise its right to pursue full uranium enrichment. To quote the words of one of the conservative observers 'what Europe has done in the recent months over Iran has surprised many eurosceptics here. Members of the administration expected the Europeans to go "soft" on Iran – but in fact quite the opposite happened'.

Consequently, as things stand at the moment there are no significant differences between the EU and US as far as dealing with Iran is concerned (though there is some apprehension in Washington about Germany's position). This situation suits Washington, which due to the reasons described above, prefers that the process continues to be led by the Europeans.

The administration's Iran policy (leaving the initiative in the hands of the Europeans) is, however, criticised by neo-conservatives who argue that whilst the issue is as serious as ever Washington seems to be suggesting that dealing with Iran is less urgent now. For example, in recent weeks an intelligence report has been leaked to the press suggesting that Iran was further from developing a nuclear weapon than initially estimated (not 5 but 10 years). This incident - according to some neo-conservatives – could have been an unofficial signal that the administration considered dealing with Iran less urgent.

An official view regarding further steps to be taken in case Iran continues its enrichment activities is to report (rather than to refer) Tehran to the Security Council. Once the issue is there, Washington would like the Security Council to adopt a statement calling on Iran to comply with its IAEA obligations. The statement should also list a number of punitive steps to be taken in case Iran refuses to comply.

In case the IAEA or the Security Council prove unable to adopt a joint policy on Iran (due to Russia's, China's and India's reluctance) Washington may be calling on the Europeans and other allies to develop a policy (for example a series of political sanctions) outside the frameworks of these organisations.

IV) Implications for the EU

The evolution of US foreign policy during Bush's second term raises a number of implications for transatlantic relations. The four outlined below are currently the most important:

- With the neo-conservative agenda on the defensive and increasingly isolated, the US is more likely to support a stronger international role for the EU. In the current conditions it is extremely unlikely that Washington would engage in prompting 'Old versus New Europe' divisions.
- Washington increasingly recognises that with its growing security and defence role the EU is likely to develop capacities outside the NATO framework, including more robust planning capabilities. It is well known that Washington is in two minds over this question: it wants the Europeans to increase their military capabilities, yet it does not want to lose its influence over the allocation of European resources. The impact of recent developments, as discussed above, is such that the former is becoming more important for the US than the latter.
- European diplomacy in Iran is well-received in America. It has weakened the arguments of neo-conservatives and it demonstrates that the EU is willing to act globally and that it remains consistent in the process. In case the UN route proves abortive, the EU and the US may want to consider alternative initiatives towards Iran.

The current crisis of leadership in the US coincides with the post-constitutional crisis in the EU. It is significant that transatlantic relations seem to be in a better condition at a time when both Europe and the US are going through a period of diminished self-confidence and greater preoccupation with domestic issues.