
Foreign Policy Without Diplomacy: The Bush Administration at a Crossroads

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Abstract

The Bush administration's foreign policy hitherto suffers from a neglect of diplomacy. It has emphasised a strategy that combines unilateral and re-militarising elements. Security is conceived of in terms of a gated community writ large. Diplomacy is downgraded to alliance-building (conveniently misnamed multilateralism) for a policy already decided. Other countries are sheer objects, not subjects, within US foreign policy. The conception of order in international society is stripped of substantial components of justice or legitimacy, to which the US would accept being subjected itself. In short, there is a tendency to repeat the US cold war strategy which reversed Clausewitz, that is, where politics becomes the prolongation of war with other means. The article consciously bases its critique mainly on realist writers, simply to show that the present US foreign policy is debatable even in realist terms.

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The terrorist attacks on the financial and political–military centre of world power have become a defining moment for the foreign policy of the Bush administration. This moment provides ‘an opportunity’, as President Bush immediately declared in a TV interview, to wage international war against terrorism and, more generally, to redirect US thinking in international affairs.

The administration has made it clear that it wants to change strategy. President Bush has declared that international terrorism is a new type of war, the first ‘war of the 21st century’. Since it is not an enemy with a face and territory, the strategy cannot just retaliate, but needs a long time frame to succeed. President Bush declared it an ‘act of war’ and spoke of US government action as ‘patient’, ‘focused’, ‘steadfast in [its] determination’.

I will argue that the more fundamental reason for a need for change in US foreign policy, in particular of the Bush administration, has little to do with the attacks, but with its limited understanding of, and importance given to, the role of diplomacy in its security policy. It has pursued a strategy that is combining unilateralism (the idea that US international politics is something that can be decided alone at home) with a reliance on military assets. If it does not reconsider, US foreign policy runs the risk of repeating mistakes from the cold war. I consciously base my critique mainly on realist writers, simply to show that the present US foreign policy is debatable even in realist terms.

The war is not new

The US has been vulnerable for a very long time. During the cold war, security was based on a systematic vulnerability, which came under the name of 'Mutually Assured Destruction'. Deterrence was made to work all the better because both sides kept their mutual vulnerability: this made it least rational to start a war.

Nor would a military attack on countries harbouring threats to US security be something new. The US government has not recoiled from intervening unilaterally in countries that it considered to be threatening US security. The Monroe Doctrine allowed the American continent to be protected from outside interference, but then also helped subsequent US administrations to intervene militarily when they deemed it necessary. Some of these threats were non-territorial, like communism, and some were fighting a non-traditional guerrilla war. Cuba was the rogue state of the day, helping guerrillas around the world, from Angola to Bolivia – and experienced a half-hearted US invasion. The cold war against communism was not just defensive posture; it also meant military interventions elsewhere in the world.

And, certainly, this is not the first time the 'war on terrorism' has been declared; the elder President Bush declared it earlier. Many national liberation movements used to be called terrorists in their inception. And, ever since the Iranian Revolution and the western support of the Afghan Mojahedin against the Soviet invasion, subsequent US administrations have faced religious-nationalist attacks against US, indeed western, troops and civilians, like the attack on the discotheque 'La Belle' in Berlin which hosted many US soldiers, or the bomb explosion on a plane which came down over Lockerbie. Already then, US presidents retorted by attacking countries that were supposed to sponsor or host terrorism, like Reagan's attack on Ghaddafi and Clinton's Cruise Missiles against Sudan and Afghanistan.

The shortcomings of George W. Bush's foreign policy

This attack showed the shortcomings of the Bush administration's understanding of security, which is primarily military and unilateral. The NMD is symptomatic of this strategy, which seems to believe that military means are enough to achieve the highest possible invulnerability and that therefore diplomacy can be downgraded. It was pursued through a 'take-it-or-leave-it' diplomacy, which has succeeded in record time in antagonizing many sectors of the international community, including some of America's allies. Apparently, there was no need for outside moderation or indeed of any pre-emptive and creative diplomacy. US diplomacy was reduced to an instrument of stimulating support in favour of a self-reliance strategy already decided anyway.

The NMD is the logical corollary of a foreign policy that looks at questions of security as if they were questions of domestic safety. The territory of the US is like

the sheltered wealthy suburbs where superior private and public security forces ensure that no violence can spill over from other more violent, and basically uncontrollable, neighbourhoods. The 'gated community' becomes the paradigm of US security thinking.

However, this strategy of military 'self-reliance' produces an important internal contradiction for US security when this order is challenged. Whereas, on a domestic basis, a legitimate police force can be regularly called in to mediate between the sheltered rich and exposed poor, there is no such thing on an international level. Hence, the US often felt called in as 'world policeman', a role with a rather delicate legitimacy. This administration acknowledged that more 'humility' with regard to unilateral military action was needed – yet without allowing multilateral action, such as the UN, to take its place.

Consequently, by having no multilateral or pre-emptive diplomatic component, yet feeling the sudden need to police, the tendency of a remilitarization of US foreign policy is but a logical, albeit paradoxical, corollary of the Bush administration's security policy. It leads to a paradox insofar as it seems to imply that the US lacks one thing in particular, namely military power, when it outshines everybody else to a degree it never did in its history. Moreover, it easily tends to get into an escalatory spiral, since it implies that defeat can only happen because 'we did not use all our power', an idea played out by the German military after the defeat of World War I and the US military after the Vietnam war. The problem with this argument is that it can never be wrong. For as long as not absolutely all means were used – a total war, as it were – one can always argue that 'we would have won, if only we had. . .'. A military logic is allowed to overtake a political one. In short, the US tends to reverse Clausewitz's dictum, where politics now becomes the prolongation of war with other means, and not vice versa, a US tendency already deplored by Raymond Aron during the cold war.¹

The National Security strategy, as exemplified by the NMD, did not mean the isolationist retreat of the US from world politics, since it ensured that no 'power above' the US could arise, a world politics issue of no mean proportions. Rather, it meant the retreat of the US from any type of engaging and conflict-preventive diplomacy in which the US would embed itself in a wider system of international governance.

Two scenarios

If the attack has opened a window of opportunity for US diplomacy – not because the US faces a 'new' vulnerability, but because the underlying ideas of its security strategy have flaws – then there are broadly two scenarios. In one, the Bush administration will police the world to make it fit its own ideas about it; in the other, it could use the brutal awakening from the illusion of 'Fortress America' to rethink the bases of its own security strategy.

The first scenario results in further militarizing US foreign policy. The US

would simply pursue its tendency to propose 'take-it-or-leave-it' policies. In this version, US diplomacy will attempt to gather support where possible (intentionally then misnamed as 'multilateralism'), and do it alone when this is not forthcoming.

Such a scenario would repeat a series of mistakes that earlier observers of US foreign policy had already brandished during the cold war. George F. Kennan thought that the Truman administration misunderstood his containment policy as an end, rather than as a means.² He thought that the western vulnerability was psychological and political. Therefore not NATO (which he opposed), but the Marshall Plan was the appropriate answer to it. Kennan insisted that the strength of democracy would finally prevail in the competition between the systems and he invited his fellow citizens to reform and improve their own society as the best way to win the cold war.³ This statement also clearly refers to the risk of using international affairs to win domestic 'wars', something, which the US had experienced during the McCarthy hearings. President Bush's declaration, 'who is not for us, is against us', might stand for this line. Colin Powell's early (pre-anthrax attacks) statement that the US would not change its way of life might fit into a line of thinking closer to Kennan.

The second major shortcoming of this (cold war) strategy is that it keeps the realm of diplomacy very limited. Yet, diplomacy will be needed. As the attack clearly showed, a military posture will hardly suffice to avoid future ones. The US is and will stay vulnerable. For the 'war against terrorism' or the 'attack on democracy' stands for something different. It stands for the acknowledgement that the principles according to which this form of international terror makes politics are not compatible with international society; the principles of terrorism, not a religion or civilization. This, besides human mourning, is the ground upon which so many countries felt solidarity with the US.

Yet, the US administration's search for complete independence of its will in international affairs undermines the very possibility of a diplomacy worth its name. While Kennan chastised the military emphasis of US foreign policy towards the communist threat and urged that the cold war be won by improving the health of democratic societies, Henry Kissinger insisted that any unilateral quest for invulnerability – any search for 'absolute security', as it were – was destined to provoke absolute insecurity for others and hence to undermine the very possibility of a functioning international Concert, a legitimate system of international diplomacy.⁴ Not accepting its own limits within the world order, the US would become the main actor to actually undermine it.

This implies that such a US diplomacy be part of the international community, that is, that it sees other international actors as subjects and not only objects of its policy. The US has to take more seriously the possibility that it itself needs to play to the rules of this international game. If this was an attack against democracy, then the attacked West must more than ever think about a world order that could be more legitimate. Military might without a vision for which it should be used might ensure short-term gains, it would not be efficient in combating terrorism.

Defining national security in such a way as to make any international governance that includes control over parts of US policy impossible has not and cannot produce security. Not paying into the UN is only one issue, here. Such an attitude has produced and will produce reactions against a perceived arrogance of power. Classical diplomacy teaches moderation and awareness of the negative effects of hubris. True, this arrogance is not something for which this administration is mainly responsible. Indeed, it is under pressure from fellow Republicans to become even more ruthless in its disregard of the international community, as in the proposed 'American Service Members' Protection Act' which exempts US citizens from rulings of the International Criminal Court which prosecutes war crimes and crimes against humanity. Indeed, this act authorizes the US President to use military force for liberating US citizens and allies held in custody by the Court in The Hague. Therefore, the act has already been dubbed 'The Hague Invasion Act'.⁵

Finally, such a strategy would paradoxically fulfil one of the key intentions of the attack. It was meant to reinstate violence as the main means of international affairs, undermining liberties at home and peace processes abroad. It was meant to make the world centre accept that international affairs is not about conflict resolution, democracy and freedom, but only about money and military might. A mainly military response without any vision of world order would produce what they were supposed to avoid: an attack on democracy. It would be a terrible irony if, by our reactions in accepting the militarization of our thinking about world politics, in accepting the building of a fault-line around identities exactly where the terrorists wanted us to see it, we would realize this intention better than the perpetrators of these attacks could ever have done themselves. No single attack, however violent, can defeat democracy and a world politics that attempts peaceful change – only we can.

The second scenario, which is increasingly voiced by US and international observers would start from the understanding that a military posture will hardly suffice to avoid future attacks. At the same time, the military alone is considered no longer sufficient for achieving security; US foreign policy must more decidedly embed itself into international society. It would imply a change towards real multilateralism, and not just coalition-building.

The most traditional move would be the multilateralization of the military side by restrengthening arms control. There is a widespread consensus, including former Reagan officials like former Assistant Secretary of Defense Lawrence Korb, that the Bush administration has gone too far in unilaterally renouncing or challenging major treaty commitments of the arms control era, like the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (already rejected in 1999 and left there by Bush), the Biological Weapons Convention (rejected in 2001), and the recent reduction of funds for the Cooperative Threat Reduction Initiatives (to hinder the proliferation of former Soviet nuclear capacities).

But arms control alone is simply a crucial means for a further end. As Kissinger writes, besides the element of power, legitimacy is necessary to build a

more peaceful international order, since an order 'which is not considered just will be challenged sooner or later'.⁶ Hence, whether or not there will be real change in US foreign policy will only become visible later when those points of the international agenda reappear which have been overshadowed by the tragic deaths. The decreasing legitimacy and obvious lack of any vision in the G8 will make itself felt even more in the future. At this point, it should be clear to the US administration that the attack is not a problem for US foreign policy alone, but also for international governance. These are huge problems, for which the US cannot bear sole responsibility and which it certainly cannot resolve alone. But, as Kenneth Waltz once wrote, while we might be all sitting in the same leaking world boat, one of us wields the biggest dipper.⁷ The present administration might have the chance to address these problems anew. It will be judged on how wise it will use this 'opportunity', as Bush called it.

'Primacy or world order'

During the cold war, the US administrations faced the 'American dilemma' between 'primacy or world order', as Stanley Hoffmann so aptly described it in the late 1970s.⁸ This Bush administration started as if its primacy was enough to ensure a world order of its liking. The attack has shown the vulnerability of the country and of this strategy: US primacy that is not embedded in a legitimate world order undermines US security. What remains to be seen is whether the changes in US foreign policy, including the pledge now to pay up to the UN, are but tactical moves, or if they could become the basis for a reorientation, a really 'defining moment'.

It remains to be seen whether the attack will have an effect on US policy similar to Matthias Rust's small private plane, which, towards the end of the second cold war, landed undetected on the Red Square in front of the Kremlin (imagine if he were a suicide bomber). Made aware of its vulnerability, this is a moment in which the US, only apparently protected by its geography, can more fully understand that security is something that can neither be achieved alone, nor with military might.

All necessary attempts to narrow the window of vulnerability cannot replace an international policy that renders its inevitable vulnerability less dangerous.

Notes

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- 5 For a discussion, see Robert W. Tucker (2001) 'The International Criminal Court Controversy', *World Policy Journal* XVIII(2): 71–81.
- 6 Henry A. Kissinger (1994) *Diplomacy*, pp79. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- 7 Kenneth Waltz (1979) *Theory of International Politics*, p210. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
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