# Primacy or Order? American Power and the Global System after Iraq

*Steven E. Miller*

To gauge the prospects for the transatlantic relationship, it is necessary first to understand the essential sources of potential discord in the divergent European and American perspectives. And above all it is the dominant views in Washington that must be recognized and understood if the prospects for Euroatlantic harmony and cooperation are to be realistically appraised.

What perceptions, preferences, and priorities of the Bush administration are potential or likely sources of transatlantic misunderstanding and disagreement?

The answer to this question comes in seven parts.

## Overwhelming priority to a war of indefinite duration

America is at war. Or at least the Bush administration is. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the war against terrorism has been the overwhelming and decisive consideration in shaping America's external policies. For President Bush, 9/11 represented both the decisive test of his presidency and a historic challenge to his generation of political leadership.

But 9/11 was furthermore a paradigm-shattering event, one that caused the President and many in his administration to look at the world in an entirely different way or, in some instances, to conclude that long-held views were now urgently relevant. More

than 18 months later, looking back on the evolution of events since 9/11, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz ranked them among the top ten—if not number one—of the most important foreign policy things for the United States over the past 100 years (Department of Defense 2003).

Consider the implications of suggesting that 9/11 might be the most influential development in 100 years of American foreign policy. This puts 9/11 on a par with or above the two World Wars, Vietnam, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the formation of NATO, and other enormously consequential events.

Much of the world reacted with horror to the attacks of 9/11 and understood and supported retaliation against the perpetrators. But for the United States, 9/11 was a portal through which the United States passed into a different, more menacing world that required the United States to play a different, more assertive role.

The consequences have been enormous, including the creation of new diplomatic alignments, far-flung military deployments, uses of force in the Philippines and Yemen, wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, and an unrelenting campaign (much of it covert) against Al Qaeda.

All of these actions, including the preventive war against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, are viewed as elements of a comprehensive long-term global war against terrorism. The Bush administration is determined to do whatever it takes to succeed in that war. In a new world, with a new sense of vulnerability, and a new and overweening mission, Washington has new priorities, new criteria for action, new ways of operating, and new preferences with respect to international order.

By no means is the war in Iraq regarded as the end of the story. In a speech on July 1, 2003, President Bush stated, "As long as terrorists and their allies plot to harm America, America is at war." (White House 2003)

America is at war but the overwhelming majority of its friends and allies are not. Almost no other government views the world

more or less exclusively through the prism of 9/11. Most other governments (and peoples) do not share the same sense of threat and vulnerability. Very few other governments believe that the post-9/11 circumstances are so dire that the normal rules and conventions of international order must be set aside.

As Javier Solana has commented, "Europeans generally do no believe that the terrorist threat is as dangerous as it is made out to be by Washington." (Pfaff 2003) So here is the most elemental trans-Atlantic divergence in perceptions of the world in which we live. The Bush administration feels that the reality of its war is so obvious and the imperatives associated with this war are so clear that it simply cannot comprehend how others can doubt America's purposes and fail to heed those imperatives.

This mutual incomprehension has been a massive source of transatlantic discord over the months since 9/11—especially in connection with the Iraq crisis—and is likely to be a source of trouble in the future.

## The preventive use of force is necessary and legitimate

Force is essential to a nation at war. This is obvious and unquestionable. And a party that has been attacked has every right to defend itself. This is an incontrovertible point. As the Bush administration sees it, the United States was attacked and is at war. Accordingly, force is a necessary and legitimate component of the U.S. response to 9/11.

But the war against terrorism is a different sort of war requiring different approaches. The Bush administration's strategy is heavily influenced by the lessons drawn from the terrorist attacks—again, the effect of the prism of 9/11 is very strong.

The key lesson is that the United States (and indeed the civilized world) is hugely vulnerable to small groups or rogue states who are able to turn modern technology to their violent purposes

especially, of course, weapons of mass destruction. Once WMD proliferation has taken place, the United States is vulnerable to such terrible threats. In Washington, this is deemed unacceptable.

But there is another step in the logic of the Bush administration's strategy. Hostile parties with weapons of mass destruction—especially terrorists but also rogue states—are able to strike suddenly, covertly, and without warning. The result could be, in some future catastrophe, 9/11 on a larger scale.

And the only truly reliable answer to this threat is the elimination of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of hostile parties or the elimination of the hostile parties themselves. And to effectively protect the United States, this must be done before there have been threats or attacks against American soil or American interests. What follows inexorably is the Bush administration's doctrine of pre-emptive (meaning preventive) war: "To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act pre-emptively." (White House 2002)

In short, the Bush administration proclaims the intention—and in Iraq it implemented the strategy—to use force when necessary to eliminate potential WMD threats to the United States. Because this is viewed in Washington as anticipatory self-defense, it is judged to be a legitimate and appropriate use of force within the national discretion of the U.S. government. Preventive war, in the current logic, is a national prerogative to be employed when Washington judges that this is necessary. In the Bush administration's eyes, this is a powerful logic and an unavoidable conclusion from 9/11.

As the fierce debate at the United Nations over war with Iraq demonstrated, many—including many in Europe—simply do not see it that way. To those not in the grips of the prism of 9/11, the American approach appeared to be an open-ended legitimization of the use of force, one that deviated from the general norms that had been advanced by the industrial democracies in the decades since World War II.

Much of the dispute over Iraq was, in truth, related to a more basic disagreement over the circumstances and conditions in which the use of force is regarded as lawful and legitimate. The Bush position produced wide unease because of the precedent it was setting, the damage it was perceived to be doing to existing law and institutions, and because of the complications for global order should the Bush doctrine become the norm.

In short, at the heart of the Bush administration's national security strategy is an assumption about the right to exercise national discretion in the use of force that is highly contested and collides with the beliefs and preferences of many in the transatlantic area. Fortunately, the number of cases in which preventive war is likely are few in number and so this may not be a perennial issue.

But any future cases have the potential to be just as contentious as was Iraq. The potential for discord is obvious. And because the Bush administration regards itself as at war against dangerous and implacable enemies and because it feels that this war was provoked by the attacks of 9/11, it is frustrated, irritated, even outraged that its policies on the use of force are questioned.

## American power is effective and virtuous

It is commonly asserted that the United States, though indisputably in possession of immense and unprecedented power, is nevertheless constrained by the fact that it cannot do everything itself and by the need for international support. Acting alone and relying heavily on military power will, in this view, be too difficult and burdensome to sustain.

Where critics on both sides of the Atlantic emphasize the limits of American power, the irrelevance of "hard" power to many of the world's great problems, the intractability of many of the world's hardest problems even in the face of enormous America power, there is a countervailing school of thought (commonly

found among President Bush's supporters and among some of his senior advisors) who believe that the United States can remake the world if only it is tough enough, persistent enough, and willful enough (Nye 2002).

Columnist Andrew Sullivan perfectly illustrates the point: "The only thing that can stop American power now is American resistance, revolt, or restraint." (Sullivan 2003)

With appropriately assertive policies and the skillful exploitation of American power, the optimists believe that the worst threats to American security—the axis of evil, at a minimum—can be successfully dealt with.

In the prevailing view in Washington, American power is not merely effective but virtuous. President Bush sees the world in stark moral terms and frames the global war on terrorism as a clear-cut struggle between good and evil.

As the self-proclaimed leader of the good guys in this black and white battle against the forces of evil, it seems inherently true and obvious to Washington that its actions are benign, its intentions are altruistic, and its purposes for the common good. Moreover, acting for good against evil require boldness and sacrifice, not timidity and equivocation.

But as captain of good against evil, Washington has expected that the other "good guys" will be at its side, at least cheering on the American battlers against evil if not joining in the fight themselves. This mentality is at the base of President Bush's view that other powers are "either with us or against us."

This view of American power and its righteousness is scarcely compatible with worldviews that contain many shades of gray. It is utterly incompatible with worldviews that see unrestrained American power as one of the great problems of the current order or worse, that see the United States as a bullying rogue hyperpower.

It fits awkwardly with worldviews that emphasize the limited utility of the varieties of power (above all military power) that

the United States possesses in abundance. It is flatly contradictory of worldviews that identify the United States as a self-interested lawbreaker flouting international convention to destroy its rivals.

This collision of worldviews produces a high degree of mutual incomprehension. The Iraq crisis is largely (though not entirely) behind us. This collision of perspectives on American power remains as a durable potential source of mutual incomprehension and discord.

## Bush policies are working

Critics of the Bush administration's foreign policy often claim that Washington's aggressive, unilateralist, force-oriented approach will be unsuccessful or counterproductive.

Those skeptical of the current character of U.S. policy tend to believe that the United States will overreach, or provoke backlashes, or alienate allies, or fail to address root causes, or otherwise prove ineffective. Those most severely critical of the Bush administration's policies believe that it has embarked on a disastrous course, one that undermines international order, damages alliance relationships, provokes potential enemies, and will ultimately be harmful to long-term U.S. interests.

The Bush administration and its supporters feel, on the contrary, that they have been substantially vindicated by the course of events since 9/11. Critics predicted that war in Afghanistan could turn into a protracted Soviet-style nightmare and that "the Arab street" would rise up if U.S. military power were applied in this Muslim land. Instead, the Taliban regime was quickly swept away and substantial American military involvement was quite short-lived.

Critics predicted that the war in Iraq posed many risks and dangers and could easily turn out to be costly and unfortunate. Though conditions in Iraq remain unsettled, the war was quick, low-cost, and triumphant and—the essential bottom line—Sad-

dam's regime has been destroyed. In Bush administration eyes, a large threat has been removed at modest cost.

And whatever its critics may think about the Bush approach to the war on terrorism, here too the administration and its supporters see evidence of significant progress. This is not only due to the destruction of Al Qaeda's infrastructure and the capture or killing of some of its important figures, but to an overall decline in the number of terrorist attacks since 9/11 from 355 incidents in 2001 to 199 in 2002 (U.S. Department of State 2003: p. 25).

Not only supportive pundits but the administration itself offers this interpretation. No doubt, there are still many (in the United States and even more elsewhere) who believe that the United States will sooner or later have to alter course because its policies are destined to sputter and fail. For the time being, however, the world must reckon with an administration confident (if not cocky) in its views and dismissive (if not contemptuous) of its critics, an administration that is riding high and feeling vindicated by the consequences of its acts.

In the areas that it most cares about—reducing threats to and increasing the protection of the United States—it believes that its policies are working and that its critics have been proven wrong (Brooks 2003).

## Growing doubts about NATO

For most of half a century, NATO was the cornerstone of American external policy. For Washington, NATO was a major stake and a major asset and whenever possible American leaders preferred to act in concert with the NATO allies.

From the earliest hours after the attacks of 9/11, however, the Bush administration exhibited a rather different instinct. Its initial concerns were not about getting the NATO allies on board for the retaliation to come or ensuring NATO's centrality in the

war that the Bush administration knew it would soon fight. Instead, the highest officials of the Bush administration were worried that allies might tie its hands, that unnecessarily including even the closest of friends might slow decisions, complicate choices, and hamper Washington's freedom of action.

Overall, NATO was remarkably absent from the debates and priorities of the Bush administration as it labored intensively to fashion a reply to 9/11. What is particularly surprising about this is that NATO had been instantly and unanimously supportive and had expressed a willingness to help. Indeed, on September 12, 2001, NATO took the unprecedented step of invoking Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, declaring that an attack on one is an attack on all ("NATO Update" 2002). For the first time ever, NATO had laid the groundwork for a collective NATO military response.

But the operational impact of the Article V decision depended on the United States. As NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson observed at the time, "The country attacked has to make the decisions. It has to be the one that asks for help." ("NATO to Support" 2001) Washington did, of course, welcome the support that its NATO allies were offering. But from the public record, there is no indication that the Bush administration intended to build its response to 9/11 around the invocation of Article V.

From those post-9/11 beginnings down to the present moment Washington has showed reticence about turning to NATO or employing the alliance in its full multilateral form. The explanation for this reticence is the Bush administration's very different perspective on the role and value of NATO. As it often attests, it continues to see value in NATO and—so far at least—it does not favor the end of NATO. Rather, in a pragmatic fashion, the Bush administration sees that NATO can be potentially useful and occasionally convenient.

But NATO is no longer always necessary or central to Washington's calculations, and there are now often circumstances

when—as illustrated above—it is judged neither efficient nor desirable to draw NATO in.

Washington sees several problems with NATO. First, in terms of decisionmaking, it is viewed as a liability. It is hard enough getting one government to take a clear decision in a timely manner. The prospect of working decisions through a process that involves 19 (and soon 26) formally co-equal partners is likely to be slow, inefficient, and (as the Iraq crisis illustrated) may not produce desired results. Better, then, to retain decisionmaking discretion in Washington—especially in a time of war.

Second, in terms of military operations, the NATO allies are usually not necessary and can be operationally inconvenient (though sometimes politically expedient). For such reasons, Washington will often prefer to retain both decisionmaking and operational descretion. In short, Washington will use NATO when NATO is thought useful.

But as the experience since 9/11 demonstrates, if operating through NATO is expected to be burdensome rather than advantageous, it will be sidelined or marginalized. This has produced transatlantic disgruntlement in the past and could well do so in the future.

## More skeptical views of Europe?

Though the European project of integration has over the decades produced frequent indifference from and occasional unease in Washington, in general the United States has been supportive of this exercise, which has increasingly come to dominate the time, energies, and priorities of European leaders. Certainly it has never been broadly threatened by or actively opposed to the development of an integrated Europe.

The crisis over Iraq brought to the fore two developments in U.S.-European relations that could produce more ambivalent, if

not downright negative, attitudes in Washington about an integrated Europe.

First, at least some in Europe seemed determined to position it as a counterbalance to American power, seeking to constrain the United States and discipline Washington's interventionism. The actions of Europe's opponents of Bush's Iraq policy, in conjunction with the notion that Europe should serve as a counterweight to the American power, has produced some predictable reactions in the United States.

Particularly among the neo-conservative supporters of President Bush, the result has been a striking growth in hostility to the European Union—not only among a minority in the United States, but also within a group with close ties to the administration.

The second feature of the Iraq case that has notable implications for U.S.-European relations is that Europe itself was bitterly divided over this issue. This was, of course, damaging for Europe and for at least its near term prospects. But just as importantly, the United States took advantage of this division, indeed, actively encouraged and exploited it. Divisions within Europe give Washington room for maneuver, allow it to work with those willing to follow its lead and try to isolate or ignore those who resist U.S. policy.

These two points together—unified Europe as a threat to U.S. interests and a divided Europe as advantageous to the United States—can lead to a very different American policy toward European integration than was evident in the past. Indeed, it can lead to a "radical change" in U.S. policy toward Europe, as Andrew Sullivan has written (Sullivan 2003).

American officials have taken to describing U.S. policy toward Europe as "disaggregation," meaning, as The Economist interpreted it, "that the Bush administration is increasingly tempted to junk the United States long-standing support for European integration and to move instead towards a policy of divide and rule." ("Divide and Rule" 2003) If this should become the unambiguous

and predominant policy of the United States, the implications for U.S.-European relations are portentous.

## Skepticism about instruments and institutions of international order

As a general proposition, European states have been great champions of multilateral instruments and institutions. The prevailing view in Europe sees the development of the United Nations and the enhancement of international law to be key elements of a desirable international order.

The predominant view in Washington today, however, is very nearly the opposite. Columnist Fred Barnes, a strong supporter of both President Bush and of the war in Iraq, writes of efforts to have the United Natios play a role in post-war Iraq that "the good news" is that President Bush "regards the United Nations more as a part of the problem than the solution." (Barnes 2003)

Indeed, from Washington's point of view, the United Nations represents problems and impediments more than order and progress. Worse, the United Nations and associated legal frameworks represent useful instruments in the hands of those who would hamstring U.S. power. Even before the Bush administration took power, the sentiment against multilateralism was strong enough that the United States was absenting itself from multilateral instruments such as the Landmine Convention or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that were judged to be contrary to U.S. interests.

But the Bush administration has enshrined this instinct as a pillar of American policy. Members of the administration have been openly skeptical about arms control, international law, the United Nations, and multilateralism generally.

The Iraq crisis only reinforced Washington's skepticism about multilateral approaches to law and order in the international sys-

tem. Thus we have yet another rather fundamental collision between Europe and the United States. Europe prefers a world that Washington finds distasteful. Europe hopes that the world of laws and institutions can be sufficiently potent and robust as to restrain the United States, an outcome that Washington resents and resists.

No doubt, in its pragmatic moments the Bush administration will be prepared to work with and through the United Nations when this suits its needs. But it will not share Europe's vision of the desirable role of the United Nations or other international institutions and instruments.

## Conclusion: Hard realities and the way ahead

American policymakers today live in a different world from the one inhabited by most of their European counterparts. It is a world of menace and war, a world of evil enemies and horrifying threats. Seeing the world through the strikingly influential prism of 9/11, American policymakers have distinctive and powerfully held views about the utility and necessity of force.

They have strong and heartfelt views about the utility and morality of American power. They have come to view the core institutions of the transatlantic world, NATO and the EU, with a hard-nosed and unsentimental pragmatism that sees little use or value in partnerships that do not advance the direct and concrete interests of the United States in the ongoing war against its enemies. And they have come to view virtually the entire apparatus of international order and cooperation as potential impediments to American purposes, as instruments in the hands of those who would restrain American power, and as inadequate barriers to the evil forces that threaten the United States.

This distilled core of belief is shared by few other governments in the transatlantic area. Even those who stood with the United

States on Iraq diverge considerably from Washington on most of these more fundamental questions.

In terms of international order and the future of the transatlantic relationship, the most crucial question in the aftermath of the Iraq crisis may be this: What lessons did the Bush administration draw from that experience?

And the answer, broadly speaking, seems to be that it reinforced all of these (pre-existing) impulses. As the Bush administration sees it, the U.N. Security Council proved incapable of standing up to Saddam Hussein. The detour through multilateral diplomacy at the United Nations proved to be a costly debacle. NATO proved to be an unreliable asset, as burdensome as it was helpful. The United Nations and the EU provided platforms from which America's friends and rivals sought to undermine its policies. And in the end it took American resolve and American military prowess to unseat the evil dictator in Baghdad.

What world are we living in? What world should we be heading towards?

What the Iraq crisis made dramatically clear is that the American and European answers to these questions are very different. This is why the management of transatlantic relations is proving so difficult, despite the existence of important common interests. Even in the context of a common interest, such as preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, Europe and America see threats differently, prefer different instruments, and pursue different outcomes.

How can Europe and the United States reconverge? With some small but meaningful steps to detoxify the transatlantic relationship.

First, tone down the confrontational rhetoric. Some statesmanship is in order here. This should be an easy and cheap way to take some of the sting out of a poisonous situation. There is nothing to be gained by prolonging the agony of the Iraq crisis by indulging the temptation to reiterate the correctness of one's own position and to criticize one's opponents.

The wounds will heal more quickly and the personal embitterment may fade more rapidly if our leaders can learn to hold their tongues and to value healing over scoring debater's points. Unfortunately, a number of the protagonists in this melodrama score poorly on this count.

Second, guard against the punitive instinct. It is already clear that there is a real temptation to teach the other side a lesson, to inflict a price for the antagonism displayed during the Iraq showdown. Payback in either direction may be gratifying but it is also shortsighted. But the punitive impulse appears to be quite powerful and is not now being wholly avoided.

Third, focus on pragmatic cooperation where interests converge. The first obvious point here is that everyone has a large stake in a successful outcome in Iraq. Certainly both Europe and Washington prefer a successful democratic transition. With the war in the past, working together to build a successful outcome in Iraq would be a very healthy step in the right direction. But so far, Washington has been reluctant to relinquish control in Iraq or to welcome a NATO or U.N. contribution.

Fourth, confront the differences in areas where there is potential common ground. For example, both Washington and Europe are strongly committed to nonproliferation. But they often disagree and feud over the threat posed by particular proliferation troublespots. This is not an insurmountable dilemma rooted in basic disagreements. Concerted effort to harmonize threat perceptions within NATO seems feasible and desirable. Similarly, both Washington and Europe wish to see agreements enforced. Effective enforcement—for example, of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—would be in everyone's interest.

There are, in short, sensible steps that can be taken to reduce the tension in transatlantic relations. But it is not clear whether they will be fully explored. America today prefers primacy. Europe prefers order. Managing that difference is the great challenge for transatlantic relations in the years ahead.

## References

Ash, Timothy Garton. "Are You With US? Are We Against You?" *New York Times*, May 30, 2003.

Barnes, Fred. "The UN's Power Grab," *The Weekly Standard*, April 6, 2003, p. 2.

Brooks, David. "The Collapse of the Dream Palaces," *The Weekly Standard*, April 28, 2003, p. 1.

Department of Defense. "Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Interview with Sam Tannenhaus, Vanity Fair," *Defense Link*, May 9, 2003, p. 1, as available at www.defense.gov/transcripts/2003.

"Divide and Rule," *The Economist*, April 28, 2003, p. 47.

"National Security Strategy of the United States of America," Washington D.C., September 2002, pp. 14–15.

"NATO to Support U.S. Retaliation," *CNN.com*, September 12, 2001.

"NATO Update: Invocation of Article V Confirmed," as available at www.nato.int/docu/update/2001, October 2, 2001.

Nye, Joseph S. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go it Alone*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Pfaff, William. "The War on Terrorism: Trans-Atlantic Differences Deepen," *International Herald Tribune*, June 15–16, 2003.

Sullivan, Andrew. "Unbound: Liberation's New World Order," www.andrewsullivan.com, April 14, 2003.

Sullivan, Andrew. "What's Next? Bush and the Post-War World," *London Sunday Times*, May 5, 2003, as available at www.andrewsullivan.com.

U.S. Department of State. *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*. Washington, D.C., 2003.

The White House. "President Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Iraq," fact sheet, July 1, 2003, p. 2, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases.