THE US MILITARY POSTURE: ‘A UNIQUELY BENIGN IMPERIALISM’?

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Before his appointment as President Clinton’s first Director of Central Intelligence in 1993, James Woolsey was asked at a Senate hearing to characterize the nature of the changed post-Cold War world. He replied that the United States had slain the dragon but now lived in a jungle full of poisonous snakes. Woolsey has gone on to become one of the leading neo-conservative security advocates of the Bush era, and his early remarks encapsulated the changing US military posture of the 1990s. This posture was sufficiently robust by the end of that decade to enable the Bush administration to underpin its new foreign and security policy with military power that gives the United States an almost unchallenged ability to dominate the global security environment.

This essay examines the changes in the US military posture during the 1990s, analyzes its status at the end of the decade and explores its potential and its crucial limitations under the Bush administration. It surveys the transformation of the US armed forces to fit them for a posture of comprehensive international control, bearing in mind the effects of the 1991 Gulf War and the experiences in Somalia and former Yugoslavia. The essay also examines the relevance of NATO, relations with Russia and China and the impact of missile defence, before assessing the impact of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq.


The rapid collapse of the Soviet bloc after 1989 resulted in the United States finding itself in a position of unparalleled power, with the intention of seeking a ‘new world order’ based on a western-dominated global market.
Almost immediately, the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 resulted in the development of a powerful coalition that put some 600,000 troops into the region and ended with the forcible eviction of Iraqi troops from Kuwait. The war had come barely two years after a period in which the United States had been closely allied to the Saddam Hussein regime. Indeed, only one month after the regime had killed some 5,000 people in a chemical attack on the Kurdish town of Hallabjah in March 1988, US Navy units had been active in destroying Iranian Navy warships, at the end of the ‘tanker war’, in an action that helped end the Iran/Iraq war on terms satisfactory to Baghdad when it had previously been facing a potential Iranian ascendancy. This was largely forgotten at the time of the 1991 Gulf War, which was hailed as an extraordinary success for the United States and its coalition allies.

Even so, there were four aspects of that war that remain relevant today. The first relates to oil security, an underlying theme of the US military posture that has become much more significant under the Bush administration. After the success of the Arab members of OPEC in putting up oil prices at the time of the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War of October 1973, the oil market entered a remarkable ‘bull’ period in which crude oil prices rose by over 400 per cent in less than a year. With the United States already becoming dependent on oil imports, the significance of Persian Gulf security was apparent, as Gulf States controlled over 50 per cent of global oil reserves. The US response was to establish a Joint Rapid Deployment Task Force at the end of the 1970s, upgraded in the mid-1980s to a unified military command, Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM was responsible for US security in an arc of nineteen countries across South West Asia and North East Africa.3

Although it had been established in the context of Cold War perceptions of a possible Soviet intervention in the region, CENTCOM’s development was sufficient to ensure that adequate basing and logistical support facilities were available in the Gulf region to enable the coalition to assemble forces and evict the Iraqis from Kuwait. Following the 1991 war CENTCOM developed a permanent presence in the region, including bases in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, backed up by a large air base and logistical centre on the British colonial territory of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. As oil security has become an increasingly significant element in the US military posture, so CENTCOM has become a core part of that posture.

A second aspect of the 1991 Gulf War was the early but incorrect assumption that the Saddam Hussein regime had been damaged beyond the point at which it could retain power, an assumption that was based in part on gross overestimates of the damage done to the Iraqi Army. In practice, there had been two quite different war aims for the two parties to the conflict. For the US-led coalition, the aim was the eviction of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, whereas the Iraqi war aim was simply regime survival. To ensure this, the regime kept almost all of its elite forces away from the immediate war zone, including most of the Republican Guard divisions. These were then available to consolidate post-war survival,
including the suppression of Kurdish and Shi-ite revolts, and to support a leadership that was to last for a further twelve years.

The third aspect of the 1991 war was that Iraq had developed, by the start of the war, a deployable deterrent made of up missiles and bombs containing chemical and biological weapons. The broad details of this capability were known to US intelligence agencies and it was also known that such systems would only be used if the regime itself was threatened with destruction. At the time of the war, there had been indications that the United States would be prepared to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of chemical and biological weapons by Iraq. This appeared to be an asymmetric deterrent, but the significant fact is that Iraq was also demonstrating a deterrent capability with its own capacity to respond with chemical and biological weapons to any attempt to destroy the regime. As one US analyst put it a short time afterwards, what was actually happening in the ‘new world order’ was the development of the ability of the weak to deter the strong.

A fourth aspect of the war that had a profound effect on US military thinking related to the Iraqi attacks on Israel and Saudi Arabia with crude and inaccurate ballistic missiles based on the Soviet Scud system. During the war itself, the Scud attacks, especially those on Israel, resulted in the coalition having to divert much of its effort to destroying the launchers. The missiles may have been crude and obsolete but they still had a substantial political effect.

There was a further legacy of the war that did not become apparent until some years later. The most damaging single incident for the US during the war was a Scud attack on a storage and billeting area in Saudi Arabia that killed twenty-eight people. While this was widely reported at the time, it was not reported that nine days earlier another missile had narrowly missed a large munitions and fuel depot at a major pier complex at the Saudi port of al Jubayl, alongside which were several US Navy ships including the large amphibious warfare ship the Tarawa. If the crude, 1960s vintage missile had hit its target, the results would have been catastrophic.

The effect of the Scud missile attacks and the knowledge of Iraqi biological and chemical weapons capabilities was to have a major impact on US military thinking over the next decade; there was now a clear need to control the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, a need for missile defence, and a need to minimize US casualties in overseas military operations – the last of these being strongly reinforced when a number of US Rangers were killed and injured in Mogadishu in Somalia in March 1994.

One result was that the NATO-backed US intervention in former Yugoslavia later in 1999 was restricted almost entirely to the use of airpower, with strike aircraft operating at altitudes of more than 15,000 feet to avoid anti-aircraft fire. This made it exceedingly difficult for NATO forces to destroy Serbian armed forces that were camouflaged and concealed in Kosovo, and led the United States to concentrate heavily on attacking the economic infrastructure of Serbia itself.

While this helped result in the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo and
the subsequent fall of the Milosevic regime, the human costs, both direct and indirect, were considerable. Over 1,000 civilians were killed in the air attacks, and substantial economic damage was done through the targeting of power plants, refineries, bridges, roads, railways, tunnels, factories and transmission lines. Overall, the air attacks did over $60 billions’ worth of damage to the Serbian economy, reducing that already weakened country to the poorest in Europe.7

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE US MILITARY

The experiences in the Gulf in 1991, and in Somalia and former-Yugoslavia later in the decade, together with numerous rebellions and uprisings and the development of ‘rogue states’, all gave the US military planners a mind-set or paradigm of a fractured world in which diverse threats to US interests were present, if often unpredictable, and had to be countered.

As a result of this, and during the course of the 1990s, US military forces underwent a substantial transformation even at a time of budget cuts, so that with the advent of the Bush administration in 2001, and in the aftermath of 9/11, the US was in an extraordinarily strong position to be the dominant player in international security.

The transition was incremental and was essentially a case of cutting back on those forces that had been designed primarily to limit Soviet power, while maintaining and even enhancing those that served to ‘keep the violent peace’ in the post-Cold War world. There were also some significant developments in military technology in which the United States had international pre-eminence that seemed likely to enable it to maintain a unique level of global military superiority.

For the United States Air Force (USAF), the Cold War era had placed the greatest emphasis on strategic nuclear forces in the form of intercontinental ballistic missiles and long-range bombers, together with the forward basing of large numbers of strike aircraft and interceptors, especially in Western Europe and East Asia. The change in the decade after the Cold War took two main forms.

The first was a substantial cutback in strategic and forward-based forces, balanced by a move towards ‘global reach’ – the ability to project power around the world. Part of this involved the ability to deploy long-range aircraft from bases in the United States supported by aerial refuelling, and the development of ‘air expeditionary wings’ that were akin to self-contained air forces of a hundred aircraft or more that could be deployed to overseas bases in response to regional crises.

The second main change was the development of precision-guided weapons, based usually on satellite or laser guidance, that could hit targets with great accuracy. Moreover, while many of these weapons were launched from aircraft they could fly considerable distances. One such ‘stand-off’ weapon was the conventionally armed air-launched cruise missile (CALCM) that was itself a modification of a nuclear missile of the Cold War era.

A remarkable example of the early use of such a system was seen on the opening night of the Gulf War in January 1991, when a number of B-52 strategic
bombers were deployed from their base in the United States and flew over the
Atlantic and Western Europe to the Middle East, firing a number of cruise missiles
at targets in Iraq before returning to their base. This was by far the longest-range
air raid in military history and was a powerful demonstration of global reach.8

A more recent USAF development, also used by other branches of the US
armed forces, has been the deployment of pilot-less aircraft for reconnaissance
purposes and also for the automatic deployment of bombs and missiles. In the
latter form they are known as uninhabited combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs). They
are operated from bases far away from their area of use, and therefore involve no
risk to US personnel. UCAVs have been used in recent conflicts including
Afghanistan and Iraq, and are likely to become much more common instruments
of war.

For the US Navy (USN), a similar transformation has taken place since the
end of the Cold War. This has involved the scaling down of naval nuclear forces,
both strategic and tactical, together with substantial reductions in the total
numbers of warships, especially those formerly deployed in an anti-submarine
role against the Soviet Navy. At the same time, the types of naval forces required
for long-distance operations against regional threats have been maintained and
often enhanced. Central to this process has been the further development of the
carrier battle group, based on a single large aircraft carrier, often nuclear powered,
accompanied by a large flotilla including cruisers, destroyers, submarines and
support vessels.

The largest class of US aircraft carrier, the \textit{Nimitz} class, is by far the largest
warship ever built. A single carrier battle group based on such a warship has more
firepower than the combined strength of the aircraft carriers in service in the five
European navies that have them – Britain, France, Spain, Italy and Russia.
During the course of the 1990s, the US Navy reduced its numbers of aircraft
carriers by only two, from fourteen to twelve, even though the main supposed
enemy, the Soviet Union, had collapsed. Moreover, new ships were launched
and the number of nuclear-powered carriers actually increased from five to nine,
giving the overall carrier fleet substantially increased endurance.

In addition to maintaining these very large aircraft carriers the US Navy has
also invested heavily in sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM). Scores of such
missiles can be deployed on a single cruiser and they can strike targets over 1,000
km from the launch point. Their primary function is land attack and they have
been used against targets in former-Yugoslavia, Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan.

One variant of the SLCM that illustrates the range of tactics available to the
United States is a version that is intended specifically to disrupt electricity
supplies. Instead of being armed with a high explosive charge, the missile
disperses large number of highly conductive carbon fibre filaments that are
deposited on electricity transmission lines and switching centres, short-circuiting
the systems. Such a weapon may be described as non-lethal in that it does not
directly kill or injure anyone, but its indirect impact, on hospitals and water
purification or sewage treatment plants, can still be disastrous.
The end result of the transformation of the US Navy is that it has the capability to project substantial military force anywhere in the world, principally with its carrier battle groups. As a result there is considerable inter-service rivalry between the navy and air force. The navy points to its carriers as functioning like massive mobile air bases, able to take up station anywhere in the world to meet a threat to US interests, whereas the air force has to have forward-basing facilities or else may have to fly its bombers over global distances. The air force counters this by pointing out that the navy may take three weeks or more to get its carriers into position, whereas the air force can strike any point on the earth’s surface in a matter of hours.

An illustration of this rivalry was the B-52 raid on Iraq at the start of the 1991 war, cited earlier. That raid, conducted over intercontinental distances, involved the use of air-launched cruise missiles almost identical to the sea-launched variants deployed at the time on US warships in the Persian Gulf and used extensively during that war. The navy missiles could have been used with much greater economy, but the air force raid was essentially an experiment in rapid global power projection.

This inter-service rivalry extends to the US Army, the branch of the armed forces that experienced the greatest cuts during the 1990s. This was largely because the army was primarily configured for an East-West conflict in Europe during the Cold War era, and had consequently developed heavily armoured forces that were less relevant to the new era.

Even so, the army has been able to adapt by altering the balance of its forces and producing equipment appropriate to the new era. The overall trend has been to cut back on the heavily armoured divisions while preserving and enhancing those geared to rapid deployment such as the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. The army has also developed a policy of forward-basing equipment for key units in zones of long-term security interest such as the Middle East.

The army has also played a leading role in the development of special operations forces, especially those concerned with counter-insurgency. In this respect it works with the navy, air force and marines in an inter-service Special Operations Command (SOCOM). Although relatively small by US standards, SOCOM still has 50,000 personnel, about half the size of the entire British army, and operates its own aircraft, ships and a range of specialist equipment. SOCOM is seen as having a particularly important function in supporting the elites of allied states in the South, and a feature of the last five years has been a substantial involvement in counter-insurgency training. This was a common feature of the Cold War era, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, where many right-wing governments in Latin America and elsewhere were supported forcefully in their actions against left-wing insurgents, the latter often backed directly or indirectly by the Soviet bloc.

Much of the recent expansion appears to be directed at countering aspects of the drugs trade, but controlling anti–elite insurgencies is also a key purpose. The extent of SOCOM’s involvement is substantial, with US training units operating...
in over fifty countries worldwide. In 1998, some 2,700 special operations troops were involved in training the armed forces of nineteen Latin American and nine Caribbean states, including the armies of Guatemala, Colombia and Suriname which have been widely criticized for human rights abuses.10

As significant as is the work of SOCOM, perhaps most interesting of all is the fourth branch of the US armed forces, the Marine Corps. Unlike most countries, the United States maintains four rather than three branches of its armed forces, an army, a navy, an air force and a marine corps, the latter being structured particularly for amphibious operations and sustainable global deployments. Moreover, the US Marine Corps is larger than the entire armies of most other countries, including Britain. And whereas the air force, navy and army all had their personnel strengths reduced by 30–40 per cent during the 1990s, the reduction in the Marine Corps strength, from 195,000 to 171,000, was barely a tenth. Although the marines have played significant roles in major wars such as the Pacific War against Japan, they have been traditionally seen as relatively lightly armed but highly mobile forces that can be used most effectively in regional conflicts.

Historically, the marines were particularly active in protecting US interests in Central and South America, and their particular strengths, such as their amphibious capabilities, mean that they now have a much more global role. A Marine Expeditionary Force made up a large component of the US invasion force in Iraq in March 2003 and this was, in turn, a result of the longer-term commitment to the Persian Gulf region undertaken more than a decade previously.

Overall, then, the four branches of the US armed forces were able to adapt effectively to the changing world order of the 1990s, but this also applied to three other aspects of US military power, nuclear forces, missile defence and the development of new generations of very powerful conventional weapons.

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION, MISSILE DEFENCE AND THE CONTROL OF SPACE

Although the United States and the Soviet Union cut their nuclear forces substantially after the end of the Cold War, they and other nuclear powers such as Britain and China showed no interest in moving away from maintaining nuclear forces. In the case of the United States, in particular, there were a number of changes in nuclear policy in the 1990s, which set the scene for more radical changes by the incoming Bush administration in 2001.

Clinton’s election in 1992 resulted in a significant number of arms control specialists joining the administration, forcing a change in nuclear policy. Under the presidency of Bush senior, there had been cuts in arsenals, but these were accompanied by a strong belief in the utility of nuclear weapons in the newly disorderly world. An example was some work done for the Strategic Air Command, known as the Strategic Deterrence Study, whose terms of reference included the belief that ‘the growing wealth of petro-nations and newly hegemonic powers is available to bullies and crazies, if they gain control, to wreak havoc on world tranquillity’. The study itself called for a new nuclear targeting
strategy that would include the ability to assemble a ‘Nuclear Expeditionary Force… primarily for use against China or Third World targets.’

This extreme view was somewhat modified at the start of the Clinton era, including a congressional ban on research and development of new small nuclear weapons and a policy of transparency at the Department of Energy, the federal department responsible for the nuclear stockpile. Under the Energy Secretary, Hazel O’Leary, there was a concerted programme to clear up the serious contamination at many nuclear weapons manufacturing sites, but the overall inclination of the Clinton administration to limit the further development of nuclear weapons was undermined when the Republicans took control of Congress in 1994.

From then on the Clinton administration showed little interest in nuclear arms control and even allowed the modification of one tactical nuclear bomb into an earth-penetrating warhead suitable for attacking underground facilities. In the Senate there was clear opposition to ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Democrats did not even attempt to take it to a vote.

The significance of these changes was heightened after the second Bush administration came to power, as evidence surfaced of a renewed interest in nuclear weapons modernization, as well as a much clearer linkage between nuclear weapons on the one hand, and chemical and biological weapons on the other. The point about this connection is that there is now a clear trend towards seeing nuclear weapons as useful in countering the less dangerous chemical and biological weapons that are being developed and deployed by substantially more countries than are seeking nuclear status.

At a more general level, this represents a further move away from controlling proliferation through multilateral action and a greater interest in pre-empting the acquisition of nuclear, biological and chemical systems by states that may act against US interests.

This trend, in turn, relates to the renewed interest in missile defence, again being promoted vigorously by the Bush administration following prevarication by Clinton. In the current US view, it is essential to develop a missile defence system that provides some protection for the entire continental United States, in addition to developing other systems designed specifically to protect US military forces and other security interests in other regions of the world.

In an ideal world, at least from a neo-conservative perspective, the United States would be able to mount regional missile protection systems together with a national missile defence while at the same time maintaining the world’s most powerful set of offensive nuclear forces, including a range of tactical nuclear weapons that could be used in circumstances that fall short of a global conflict.

Furthermore, one particular aspect of the missile defence programme has much wider military implications, and may even be capable of setting off an entirely new arms race. This concerns the development of high-power lasers and other directed energy weapons, an aspect of military technology that is currently receiving substantial funding. Since the first development of lasers in the 1960s, their military potential has attracted particular attention. If a weapon is defined
as a means of delivering energy from a source to a target, then an ‘ideal’ weapon would be able to do so with great accuracy, at a very long range and at close to the speed of light. A directed energy weapon could theoretically have such properties and one of the most significant of the current programmes is the development of the Airborne Laser (ABL) a high-power chemical laser mounted on a Boeing 747 and expected to be capable of destroying a ballistic missile shortly after it has been launched at a range of up to 650 km.

The ABL could be deployed as soon as 2010, but there is greater interest in a much larger system of Space-Based Lasers (SBLs) that would be used primarily for destroying missiles but might also be capable of targeting any point on the Earth’s surface with impunity. The SBL may still be fifteen or more years in the future, but it and other systems have already attracted much attention because of their potential for other military uses.

In June 1998, the USAF set up a programme to investigate the wider military applications of directed energy. Termed the Directed Energy Applications for Tactical Air Combat (DEATAC) and headed by the former USAF Chief of Staff, General Ronald Fogelman, one of its main aims is to study how directed energy weapons could be used from aircraft in a variety of tactical roles. It is concerned with generic directed energy systems, not just the application of the ABL to tasks other than missile defence. As Fogelman put it: ‘I believe that directed energy weapons will be fundamental to the way the Air Force fights future wars. This study, which I am pleased to be part of, will help prepare us for the changing face of warfare, It is an important step in pursuing the potential of directed-energy technologies.’ The leader of the study, William Thompson, indicated the wide scope of the programme:

We’ll be looking exclusively at directed-energy concepts at a range of power levels, to address weapon and mission-support applications. We’ll also be considering a variety of airborne mediums, from manned aircraft to remotely piloted vehicles.

What this means is that the US military is already fully alert to the implications of directed energy weapons as a potential military revolution, giving the possessor the ability to destroy targets at extreme ranges with almost instantaneous effect. Such weapons would further aid the ability of the United States armed forces to achieve what is commonly termed ‘full spectrum dominance’, the ability to win any conflict at any level at any time.

Such dominance also extends to the control of space, the widespread view across the US military being that it is essential for the United States to be the world’s dominant space power. New weapons systems such as the planned Space Based Laser are seen as having an impressive potential in this regard, allowing the development of systems that could destroy any other state’s satellites and other space-based systems as well as being able to attack targets on the Earth’s surface.

The US Space Command has developed a Long Range Plan for the period through to the year 2020 that is predicated on the principle that the United States...
must have clear and unequivocal control of space, including what is termed ‘worldwide situational awareness’. This would form the basis for an ability to counter any threat, ensuring that US military dominance is as near complete as can be achieved.

AREA IMPACT WEAPONS

There is one further military development that has had a substantial effect in recent conflicts – the area-impact munition (AIM). Much has been made of the development of precision-guided munitions that can hit targets with great accuracy, avoiding collateral damage, but there has been a parallel development of weapons that are designed specifically to cause the maximum number of casualties over as wide an area as possible.

Early examples were napalm and fragmentation shells, but the more recent emphasis has been on cluster bombs, multiple-rocket systems and very large blast bombs. Modern cluster bombs are actually canisters that disperse 150 to 200 grenade-sized ‘bomblets’ that detonate, collectively releasing several hundred thousand high velocity shrapnel fragments against ‘soft’ targets such as people. Each cluster bomb may disperse over an area of half a hectare, and satellite-guided cluster bombs can be set to spread over a much wider area. A B-52 bomber can deliver twelve such bombs over six hectares in a single sortie.

The Multiple Launch Rocket System is a ground-based area impact weapon that is even more devastating. A salvo of twelve MLRS missiles can disperse the power of forty cluster bombs over an area of twenty hectares at a range of over thirty kilometres. The most recent large blast bomb is the Massive Ordnance Air Burst (MOAB), a 9.5 tonne bomb that would be capable of killing an entire battalion of troops, up to 600 people, if they were caught in the open.

Many of these area impact weapons were originally developed for use by the US in Vietnam or by the Soviets in Afghanistan, but they have been used in several conflicts since the end of the Cold War including former-Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and both the wars with Iraq. In all of these more recent cases there has been a persistent use of such weapons and the effects on military and civilians have been substantial, with the added problem that many of the individual bomblets fail to detonate and act like anti-personnel land mines, particularly dangerous to children.

THREATS AND RESPONSES

This essay has so far reviewed developments in US military forces and technologies from the end of the Cold War through to the end of the twentieth century, including an indication of current trends. To summarize, an incremental transition in the US armed forces during the 1990s transformed them into forces that were considered to be well-suited to the disparate regional threats to the United States and its economic and political interests. These included a transition to a much stronger global ‘reach’ for the US Air Force and the US Navy, the maintenance and re-equipping of the US Marine Corps and the re-orienta-
tion of the US Army to more mobile forces. Power projection was aided by the development of long-range stand-off weapons such as the air-launched and sea-launched cruise missiles and specialized munitions for causing major economic damage through, for example, disrupting electricity supplies.

More recent trends include the extensive use of pilot-less aircraft, concentrated levels of intelligence-gathering, often space-based, and the early development of directed energy weapons that may have the capacity to cause a further revolution in military power.

What is now required is to place these changes in military technologies and tactics in their political and strategic context. This is best considered in three stages – the state of US strategic thinking prior to the Bush administration, the changes brought about by that administration after January 2001, and the subsequent impact of 9/11.

The decade after the end of the Cold War was characterized by the evolution of a world view within US security circles that was reasonably homogeneous and appeared relatively stable. On this view, there was no global challenger to US military hegemony but there were two states – Russia and China – that might present a challenge at some time in the future. In addition, there were two regions of the world that were considered to be endemically unstable, and where US security might be indirectly threatened – the Middle East and North East Asia – and there were areas of sporadic conflict such as the Balkans and Central Africa that might impinge on US interests. In addition, there were four issues that were more generic than geographical: the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and ballistic missiles, terrorism and the narcotics trade.

North East Asia was seen as an area of threat because of the perceived antagonistic behaviour of North Korea, although that had partly been eased by diplomatic moves in the mid-1990s. By contrast, Iraq and Iran represented continuing problems, along with anti-US paramilitary actions in western Gulf states and wider anti-American sentiment in the region stemming from US support for Israel. Elsewhere, the United States would intervene in pursuit of its own security interests, sometimes in coalition with other states, but its armed forces had little interest in peace-keeping, not least after the experience of Mogadishu.

Russia was not seen as a major near-term threat, and there was some ambivalence over the extent to which it was appropriate to incorporate Russia into the NATO group. Although Russia retained some core strategic nuclear forces, and maintained tactical nuclear forces, partly because its conventional forces were so weak, that very weakness meant that Russia was of little direct military concern. The dubious security of its stocks of old nuclear weapons and fissile material was a cause for concern, as were the determined efforts of near-bankrupt Russian arms companies to export weapons systems, but the Russian military threat was essentially minimal.

China was a different matter. Even though its GDP per capita was barely one thirtieth of that of the United States, China’s economic growth, at up to 10 per
cent a year, combined with a population more than four times that of the United States, were indicators of substantial potential as a possible superpower within two decades. China raised, and still raises, conflicting views on the American right. Those whose main interests lay with business tended to see China primarily as a state with immense potential as a market, whereas neo-conservative thinking, even before the Bush administration, was far more concerned with China as a rival great power. In this line of thinking, indeed, one motive for national missile defence was the probability that it would get a highly negative reaction from China.

Historically, China has developed and maintained fairly robust and survivable nuclear forces that have been oriented primarily towards the immediate region, including Russia. In spite of having the technical and manufacturing capability to develop substantial strategic nuclear forces that could readily target the continental United States, China declined to do so, instead maintaining an arsenal of barely twenty missiles of intercontinental range.

From an American neo-conservative perspective, it could well be feasible to develop a national missile defence programme that would counter such a small force. Furthermore, the effect on China would be that it would see itself as having no effective deterrent in any kind of future Sino-American crisis, leading to a likely decision to expand massively its own strategic nuclear forces in order to swamp US missile defences, given that it would not have the technical competence to develop its own missile defence system. Such a Chinese nuclear expansion would have, from a neo-conservative perspective, two advantages. Firstly, it would encourage China to divert public spending from the civil economy to the military, limiting its potential for economic growth. Secondly, it would establish China as a clear threat across a wider swathe of the US political spectrum than just the neo-conservative right.

From this same perspective, the role of NATO is seen to be one of assisting with the stability of Europe and its immediate environs, with appropriate increases in defence spending to enable this to be possible. At the same time, there would be a deep reluctance to see NATO member states develop capabilities that could any substantial way infringe US military power.

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION AND THE NEW AMERICAN CENTURY

Prior to the formation of the Bush administration, the threats and possibilities outlined above represented mainstream centre-right opinion in the United States, and this included a tolerable commitment to international cooperation and even to multilateral arms control processes such as the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention.

The bio-weapons commitment was actually quite significant. The convention dates back to 1972, but has no provision for inspection and verification. Given the risks of new kinds of bio-weapons, utilizing developments in genetic engineering, there is a widespread belief in the arms control community that
strengthening the treaty should be a priority. As a consequence, negotiations
started in Geneva in the mid-1990s to develop a protocol that built a rigorous
verification regime into the treaty. The United States was key to this, as accept-
tance by the US of the need to inspect its advanced biotechnology industries
would greatly increase the chance of world-wide acceptance. Under Clinton, the
US was an active participant in the negotiations.

It is true that such multilateralism was not universally supported, especially
where the Republican-controlled Congress was concerned, and this was
reflected in caution on such issues as the proposed ban on anti-personnel land
mines and United Nations proposals on the control of arms transfers, and outright
opposition to the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

One other significant feature of the 1990s was the consolidation of US defence
companies into a handful of very large enterprises, and this meant that there were
singularly powerful and well-financed pro-defence lobbies, operating especially
in Washington. One area of considerable emphasis was the threatened prolifer-
ation of ballistic missiles, so that the need for a national missile defence
programme was promoted with great vigour.

More generally, the years immediately before the election of George W. Bush
witnessed a degree of political activity on international security issues that was
reminiscent of the final three years of the Carter presidency twenty years previ-
ously. Then, there had been a very powerful conservative campaign to ‘re-arm
America’ in the face of a perceived Soviet threat, with interest groups such as the
Heritage Foundation, the Committee on the Present Danger and High Frontier
all vigorous in their pursuit of higher defence spending. Many of the people
involved in these interest groups went on to be influential members of the first
Reagan administration, and some were involved in broadly similar campaigns in
the late 1990s.

In the more recent experience, though, there was a fundamental difference in
general outlook. In the late 1970s US foreign policy was seen, somewhat crudely,
as a matter of an ideological conflict between American free enterprise capitalism
and communism. In the late 1990s, communism was considered to be defeated
and the neo-conservative view was that there was now an historic mission for
the United States to consolidate this victory by creating a world economic envi-
ronment built on American principles. Indeed, the mission was to create an
‘American Century’, one of the key neo-conservative groups promoting this
view being the Project for the New American Century, established in 1997.

The Project had as its initial supporters people such as Richard Cheney and
Donald Rumsfeld, in addition to many other luminaries who now feature in the
Bush administration, particularly in defence and foreign affairs. In its statement
of principles, the Project asks ‘Does the United States have the resolve to shape
a new century favourable to American principles and interests?’ It believes that
this is essential and that it is necessary ‘to accept responsibility for America’s
unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our
security, our prosperity, and our principles.’

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The neo-conservative right does not accept that there can be any legitimate alternative. It is an article of faith that this is the appropriate way for the United States and the whole world. To accept the possibility of alternatives would mean that the dominant model may not be fully valid. Therefore any other approach must at least be deeply wrong-headed if not malign.

Although Bush was elected with the narrowest of margins, failing to get even the largest share of the actual vote, any idea that his administration would seek consensus was ruled out at once, especially on issues of international security. It was clear from the start that a unilateralist approach would dominate security thinking, both in the narrow sense of cooperative arms control and in more broadly based arenas. This extended to opposition to the proposed International Criminal Court, withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty as a national missile defence programme was accelerated, and strong opposition to planned talks to control the weaponization of space, and also to the strengthening of the bio-weapons treaty. As a result of this last issue, over six years of negotiations in Geneva were lost. To the dismay of European states that considered themselves allied to the US, the Bush administration even took the decision to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocols on the control of climate change, a modest agreement that had had strong European support.

This is not to suggest that the United States was unilateralist on all issues. On the contrary, the North American Free Trade Area was supported as were other trade agreements favourable to the US economy, but the policies of the new administration were highly selective and were predicated in the belief that what was good for America was necessarily good for the world. It was a view put effectively by Charles Krauthammer, writing just three months before 9/11:

Multipolarity, yes, when there is no alternative. But not when there is. Not when we have the unique imbalance of power that we enjoy today – and that has given the international system a stability and essential tranquillity it had not known for at least a century. The international environment is far more likely to enjoy peace under a single hegemon. Moreover, we are not just any hegemon. We run a uniquely benign imperium.18

THE IMPACT OF 11 SEPTEMBER

The attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 had a profound impact on the US as a whole and on the military and the neo-conservatives in particular. The twin towers were culturally the very symbols of post-war American success and their destruction, watched live on television by tens of millions of Americans, was visceral in its effect. Although far less prominent, the attack on the Pentagon had a similar effect within the US military and the Washington security community. The ability of a small paramilitary group to attack the centre of global military power was a deep shock to the military leadership, both attacks demonstrating a vulnerability that had hardly been recognized.
This came at a time when the neo-conservative security agenda was really getting into its stride, with a near universal perception that the United States had a commanding authority in terms of global security. 9/11 might have caused a re-think. It might even have suggested that maintaining international stability through economic dominance backed up, where necessary, by military force, would lead not to stability but an indefinite state of conflict.

An astute Southern perspective, published in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, was that of Walden Bello. Condemning the 9/11 attacks as horrific, despicable and unpardonable, he went on to caution against an ‘iron fist’ response that ignores the underlying context. He pointed to the frequent use of indiscriminate force by the United States, not least in Korea and Vietnam, and to the bitter mood throughout much of the Middle East and South West Asia, directed partly against the United States because of its perceived dominance of these regions, but also against autocratic states dependent on continuing US support. He concluded:

The only response that will really contribute to global security and peace is for Washington to address not the symptoms but the roots of terrorism. It is for the United States to re-examine and substantially change its policies in the Middle East and the Third World, supporting for a change arrangements that will not stand in the way of the achievement of equity, justice and genuine national sovereignty for currently marginalized peoples. Any other way leads to endless war.19

In practice, the reverse was the case, and in the eighteen months following 9/11 there were four major developments in the US security posture, all of them signalling a reinforcement of the neo-conservative security agenda.

The first was the vigorous pursuit and destruction of the Taliban regime and al-Qaida elements in Afghanistan, using a combination of air power, special forces and the large scale recruitment and arming of Northern Alliance ground troops. The Taliban regime was destroyed and al-Qaida dispersed, at a cost of the lives of at least 3,000 civilians, a similar number to those who died in the 9/11 attacks. The US subsequently resisted attempts by a number of states to establish a countrywide stabilization force to add civil redevelopment, not least because this would involve a much greater involvement of other states and a loss of control for the US itself.

While some of the larger cities such as Kabul underwent a successful transition to a more peaceful environment, much of the country remained in the hands of warlords, with continuing US military action against Taliban and other militia. Moreover, few of the Taliban or al-Qaida leadership were killed or taken into custody and al-Qaida and its associates continued paramilitary actions across the world, including attacks in Indonesia, the Philippines, Kenya, Morocco and Pakistan.

A second response was a marked curtailing of human rights through many actions of the US government, often in concert with other states. The latter included more marked control of opposition groups in many states in the guise
of the ‘war on terror’, as well as the US policy of detaining presumed terrorists without trial at the Guantanamo base in Cuba.

A third response was the declaration of a number of ‘rogue’ states as part of an ‘axis of evil’, with Iran, Iraq and North Korea being primary candidates for evil status, followed by Syria, Libya and Cuba. This was combined with the development of a new international security strategy that was notably open about pre-empting possible future threats to US interests.

Finally, the Bush administration proved determined to execute a comprehensive change of regime in Iraq. While this was initially predicated on the need to eliminate Iraqi chemical and biological weapons, the war proved deeply controversial and resulted in worldwide protests and a clash with some European states, most notably France. The war itself was costly in human terms, with at least 5,000 civilians and well over 10,000 Iraqi soldiers killed and many tens of thousands injured.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES**

United States military capabilities are pre-eminent. The US has a degree of military superiority that is unparalleled even by Britain at the height of its imperial capabilities in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, these capabilities are present in a state pursuing a wider global agenda of a single economic paradigm, and one that is readily prepared to use military force when it perceives its interests to be at risk. The impact of the 9/11 attacks has powerfully reinforced the existing neo-conservative mindset, making their security agenda more widely acceptable to US public opinion.

At the same time, this powerful unilateralism is not accepted as appropriate by many states such as France and Germany that would otherwise share many aspects of the economic agenda. Even stronger is the opposition to US power in much of the rest of the world, especially outside the ruling elites. And as a result, one trend that is already evident, as the sheer power of US military capabilities becomes apparent, is a move towards asymmetric warfare.

Currently this takes two main forms. One is a greater imperative for potential oppositional states such as Iran and North Korea to develop their own deterrent capabilities, primarily to forestall US intervention. The other is a pronounced tendency for oppositional paramilitary groups to develop the capability to attack US and other interests at weak points in their power structures. While 9/11 was the most notable example of such action, it represents only one part of the potential capabilities of oppositional paramilitaries.

It is probable that this will become one of the major responses to US power, and that further attacks such as those of 9/11 will further reinforce the neo-conservative security paradigm, leading progressively to Bello’s ‘endless war’. Given the confluence of oil reserves, US support for Israel, the occupation of Iraq and continuing instability in Afghanistan, it is likely that the core region for such developments will be the Middle East and South West Asia.

Such a prognosis is daunting. It implies the prospect of further major para-
military attacks on the United States and its overseas interests, followed by even more forceful responses. It might be the case that the political system in the United States would eventually see that such policies were self-defeating and would accept the need for an alternative security paradigm. The problem is that such a development might take some years and would follow much suffering and violence.

A more positive analysis relates to the evidence that a more general political antagonism to the ‘New American Century’ is developing, centred on two elements: the attitudes of political elites in Southern states, and a more global movement encompassing individuals, non-government organizations and a wide range of groups often labelled as part of an ‘anti-globalization’ movement.

A perceptive analysis from the Geneva-based South Centre, published soon after the 9/11 attacks, argued that the ‘war on terror’ was already being seen in the context of Northern dominance of the international financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO, as well as attitudes to climate change and the tardy and thoroughly limited progress on debt relief.

Increasing numbers in the South perceive the evolving situation as no less than modern imperialism, using the full panoply of mechanisms to bend the will and shape the global order to suit the preferences and needs of the major advanced industrial nations. Moreover, this new imperialism is largely unhindered, in fact it is even aided and abetted, by the multilateral mechanisms developed over the past five decades.

Growing resentment in the South at the sense of powerlessness in the face of Northern arrogance and impunity breeds frustration, which hardly provides fertile ground for development or peace or building the international community. Now, the fear of speaking up in defence of one’s own interests has been further exacerbated by the new dictum ‘You are either with us or against us’.

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, one of the most significant global developments was the rise of a broad movement that was critical of the adverse effects of globalization. This was expressed in many individual campaigns on issues such as trade reform, labour rights and debt relief, but also coalesced into much bigger oppositional gatherings around meetings of international financial institutions in Seattle, Genoa and Washington, as well as being expressed through a series of alternative ‘peoples’ summits’.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, such opposition was muted, but it had re-emerged with renewed vigour by the time of the G8 Summit at Evian in France in May 2003. By then the movement of global opposition was no longer constrained by a fear of criticizing the military responses to 9/11. Moreover, it was actually strengthened by the parallel opposition that had developed to the war in Iraq, producing, in the early part of 2003, the largest ever anti-war protests across the world.

A consensus may therefore be emerging composed of several elements. The first is the view that the ‘war on terror’ has evolved from what would have been
acceptable as a legitimate attempt to bring to justice those responsible for 9/11 to a much wider process of curbing opposition to US policies. The ‘war on terror’ therefore continues with decreasing legitimacy. The second is that the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq was primarily about the control of an immensely resource-rich region, as part of a wider policy of international control by the United States and some coalition partners.

These views coalesce with a third element, a much more broadly based opposition to global economic trends. As such, western economic policies, dominated by the United States, form an integral part of a wider hegemony into which the security paradigm is incorporated.

One complication is that a number of western governments may share some of the first two elements of the analysis, but are deeply reluctant to accept the radical critique of the global economic system. Because of this, it would make little sense to rely on such governments to seek to curb current US policies beyond the more narrow aspects of counter-terrorism and Middle East policy.

It follows that the main focus in promoting an alternative security paradigm must be on non-government organizations, citizen groups and independent analysts. Following the attacks of 9/11, there has been a marked hardening of the old paradigm that may well have set us back a decade, but there is every chance of further analysis, and the demonstration of alternatives, that will help to show the futility of that approach. The next decade will be crucial in this regard and it follows that activists and engaged intellectuals of all kinds have an immensely important role to play and a considerable responsibility to use all their efforts to do so.

NOTES


3 One of the clearest expositions of the increasing strategic significance of the Persian Gulf oil supplies was in the Military Posture Statement of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Fiscal Year 1982, published in Washington DC in February 1981.

4 The most detailed account of the development of the Iraqi chemical and biological weapons programmes prior to the 1991 Gulf War, including the actual deployment of offensive systems during the war, is to be found in a 1995 report of the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), to the Security Council: ‘Report of the Secretary-General on the status of the implementation of the Special Commission’s plan for ongoing monitoring
and verification of Iraq’s compliance with relevant parts of Section C of Security Council resolution 687 (1991), New York: UN Security Council report S/1995/684, 11 October 1995. The fact that US intelligence agencies were aware of an Iraqi willingness to use such systems came to light in 1996 when the US Department of Defense made available on the Internet a large number of reports and studies relating to the Gulf War. These included, by mistake, a classified report relating to a National Intelligence Estimate of November 1990, two months before the start of the war. The report was quickly removed from the website but not before it had been read by a number of analysts.

5 One of the threats said to be facing the United States was listed by Roger Barnett, a military analyst and former US Navy submarine captain as the ‘Impact of high technology weapons and weapons of mass destruction on the ability – and therefore the willingness – of the weak to take up arms against the strong. Roger W. Barnett, ‘Regional Conflict: Requires Naval Forces’, Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute, June 1992.

6 This incident only came to light almost eight years after the event: John D. Gresham, ‘Navy Area Ballistic Missile Defense Coming On Fast’, Proceedings of the US Naval Institute, January 1999.

7 Economist Intelligence Unit report, 21 August 1999.

8 Details of the development of the conventionally-armed air-launched cruise missiles (known as the ‘secret squirrels’ after a cartoon character) were not published until three years after the 1991 Gulf War: John Tirpal, ‘The Secret Squirrels’, Air Force Magazine, April 1994.


15 Ibid.

16 Of the numerous sources on the military view in the latter part of the 1990s, the following are indicative: Hans Binnendijk, ‘America’s Military Priorities’, Strategic Forum Number 20, Institute for National Security

17 See a perceptive article on this outlook published just three weeks before the 9/11 attacks: Thomas E. Ricks, ‘U.S. Urged to Embrace An “Imperialist” Role’, _International Herald Tribune_, 22 August 2001. For details of the Project for the New American Century, see www.newamericancentury.org/.

