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September 11th and its implications for EU and NATO

By Christopher Coker

Ten years after the end of the Cold War the United States is still learning to cope with what others, notably the French, have been pleased to call its 'hegemony'. September 11th taught the US the old lesson that hegemony inevitably invites opposition. Also, the United States has come to understand, that dominance is neither omnipotence nor invulnerability. Indeed before September 11th, few Americans understood how profound their vulnerability was.

Throughout the period, Americans have groped for a successor to the Cold War containment doctrine: a single overarching framework that would provide reliable guidance for those involved in the onerous task of managing international security. It is clear that some American policymakers now think they have found one in the ill-defined 'war against terrorism'. Like containment itself, this core strategic idea will require a great deal of refinement and public debate before it crystallises into an operational strategy. For the

moment, America's allies find themselves faced with some striking tactical choices while that debate is being conducted.

Do they accept America's dominance remains unchallengeable? Or will it be challenged in the next decade by the next round of countries coming up? Do they work within the framework of global supremacy as presumably they must or may even wish to, to bandwagon or balance, to influence policy at the margin or build up the institutional power of the EU.

The outcome of the Afghan War poses a more striking question still. Is partnership still meaningful in the world in which the US appears to be turning its back on many of the multilateral institutions or approaches it helped establish after 1945 and through which it chose to shape an international environment favourable to its and Europe's interests.

We should not forget that the tendency to unilateralism is one that distinguished the Clinton years as well. The Helms-Burton Act (the application of extra-territorial rules); the opposition to a UN Rapid Reaction Force and an international criminal court; the independent, unilateral action against rogue states like Iraq; the failure to sign the anti-personnel landmine treaty; and the Senate's decision to reject the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty all raise questions about the US commitment to multilateralism. As Madeleine Albright famously remarked, "multilateral if possible, unilateral if necessary". And although the examples I've cited largely found the Clinton administration opposed to Congress, the difference between the two was not as marked as many thought at the time.

Now the decisive humiliation of radical Islam (which undoes the humiliation America suffered at its hands in the Lebanon in the 1980s and Somalia in 1993) put the administration and Congress in common accord. And it raises for America an important question about the continued relevance of alliances and allies. For there is no sign that the United States is converted to Tony Blair's concept of 'international community' or

that the compromises that have been made, (the \$800million paid to the United Nations in arrears) are the building blocks of a liberal international order. Indeed US policy for years to come may be both interventionist and unilateralist compared with the past when unilateralism was traditionally associated with isolationism.

None of this is welcome news to a Europe that is hoping to become more self-assertive itself with the launch of the Euro and continuation of ESDI.

Hegemonic power traditionally has depended on two elements: power (coercion) and consent. Many great powers in the past were often coercive and highly successful for a time but a combination of enemies always overcame them. Two hegemonies managed to combine power with consent, whether open or tacit. One was the United Kingdom between 1815-1870 and the United States after 1945.

British hegemony, we must remember, began with a decisive act against terrorism in 1816, with the destruction of the Barbary pirates, an act authorised by the international community at the Congress of Vienna a year before. It was an act executed entirely by the Royal Navy under Lord Exmouth. The UK role continued with the Navy campaign against the slave trade. (On behalf not only of the state by antislavery movement, the first global protest movement in history).

American hegemony today differs from Britain's in three critical respects. Militarily the UK was challenged by other great powers after 1870. The campaign in Afghanistan shows the extent of American military dominance. America's ability to project power remains unique. The technologies involved in the war reflect an R and D investment no other power or powers can match, and one which probably gives the US a 15-20 year lead over the next challenger. President Bush is proposing a staggering increase of \$48bn in the coming year, a rise larger than the entire defence budget of any of America's allies. The

Pentagon's budget is now larger in cash terms than the defence spending of the next nine countries in the world combined. And at 3.8% of GDP, the US defence budget is twice that of any other country. Only Britain and France come anywhere close and given the US economy is ten times larger than the British or French the scale of disparity is enormous.

This exposes the fact that the US no longer has military allies. The decision to exclude them stemmed in part from its unfortunate experience in the Kosovo War where it took nineteen governments to agree on every target. But even if they had been included they would have been able to provide little support. Instead of using NATO, America went in for asset-stripping, using it selectively (special forces in the UK) which puts into question Lord Robertson's suggestion last summer that in the early twenty-first century NATO will be able to shape the new security agenda itself.

Secondly, British hegemony was undermined by the loss of markets and its loss of technological leadership to Germany. After sustained growth in the 1990s (the highest in its history) the US looks unchallengeable within the global economy, at least for the foreseeable future. One of the symbolic features of the Afghanistan war in this sense was the absence of Japan. Back in 1991 *The Economist* carried a piece on the use of the USS *Missouri*, an old Second World War battleship taken out of mothballs and used against Iraqi positions in Kuwait every night. The *Missouri* was the battleship on which General McArthur took Japan's surrender in 1945. Now, *The Economist* opined, it was back in the waters of the Gulf, "courtesy of the Japanese taxpayer". Clearly, those who fire the shots no longer always call them. Now the mood has changed. The summit meeting summoned in Tokyo this year at Japan's invitation to discuss the reconstruction of the Afghanistan state and economy was accompanied by a debate in Japan itself as to whether a country that has been in recession since 1989 has money to spare for

anyone else.

This brings in the EU. US economic dominance is not as firm as its military. There are structural weaknesses in the American economy: such as a trade deficit and an enormous dependence on energy imports. And the emergence of the Euro could, if successful, be a threat to the dominance of the dollar. The European Union is now the only potential challenger to the United States and the global economy. And it is in the economic sphere (not the military) that Europe is a genuine partner.

The third point of difference between the US and American hegemony was the element of soft power. Britain had very little. The United States has a lot. Even during US setbacks in the 1970s in Vietnam and with the collapse of the dollar American ideas about global governance retained their authority. The prestige of US power was never greater than inside the Soviet Bloc when in 1989 the people of the Czech Republic and the GDR came out onto the streets chanting 'we are the people' (an echo of 'we, the people', the most famous line of the US Declaration of Independence). So too, America's authority was at its height when Chinese students in Tiananmen Square erected a statue of liberty, an act which sealed their doom. Today, the situation is very different. America's moral authority, if anything, is on the decline. As Time recently reported, seven out of ten boys in the city of Kano (the Islamic heart of Nigeria) have been called 'Osama' since September 11th. Even outside the Moslem world, in Brazil, opinion polls reveal 80% of the people opposed to the Afghanistan war.

Nowhere is anti-Americanism more serious than inside the West. It is an old phenomenon, one which dates to the days of 'Le Defi Americaine', the economic challenge to European sovereignty. Today it tends to be more cultural and more threatening, for it threatens to dispossess Europe not of its sovereignty but its soul. America's social model finds itself in opposition to

European social democracy, which explains the serious difference on capital punishment. These differences may seem at times unreal but they may constitute a future faultline or fissure. As Henry Kissinger argues in his recent book, this ideological rump of popular conservatives, communitarians and the old left who have little in common except dislike of America, may constitute “a new radicalism” against globalisation. And it is becoming increasingly difficult for European governments to defend the United States. In the past, at least, a self-consciously liberal hegemon was prepared to act through multilateral institutions which disguised, legitimated and even moderated its dominance. The Cold War also provided a narrative of common values shared by the ‘free world’. The central difficulty for America’s European partners (as Bush’s State of the Union address revealed) is that since September 11th the United States increasingly justifies its dominant position in terms of national interest, not, as Tony Blair would prefer, a doctrine of international community.

So, European governments are faced with two choices in default of what was on offer in the past: Kennedy’s ‘Atlantic Partnership’ and Bush’s ‘New World Order’. Either they can bandwagon or balance. The British have preferred to bandwagon since 1945; the French to balance since 1958. Neither policy has succeeded in part because they were opposed.

Before September 11th the two began to come together. There was a tendency even for the UK to ‘hedge’ by moving towards the French position. Their experience of Bosnia and Dayton in particular made them wary of US Unilateralism; the Kosovo War revealed the extent of their military inferiority all too starkly. The result: ESDI, offered its members not independence but a degree of autonomy with the Atlantic Alliance, but September 11th changed all that. Not only the British but the French (in the face of considerable domestic opposition) and the Germans, chose to bandwagon. All three governments appear to have fol-

lowed this path in the hope of influencing American policy and more importantly restraining it in respect of Iraq and Iran. From what we know, that influence is minimal. It is unlikely to have much effect on the campaign against terrorism this year either.

This leaves not NATO but the EU as the only potential balancer. The EU is already a balancer in global WTO negotiations, in international regulation (in opposing the extra territorial reach of American anti-trust policy towards multinational corporations, and the Euro may, if successful, provide it with another instrument as well. But Europe is far away from balancing the United States in the military sector or treating it on equal terms.

The problem with this new world post-September 11th is the balance to be struck between military power and economic influence. Since the end of the Cold War America's distrust of multilateralism, shaped largely by Congress, has tipped the Foreign Policy budget towards military power. As a result, the US now accounts for 40% of global military expenditure. The EU has gone in the other direction: disastrous defence cuts since 1989 and the failure of Germany to professionalise its armed forces has reduced Europe's share of global military expenditure to 25% or less. Conversely, the EU now contributes 40% to the budgets of the UN and UN agencies, while the US is struggling to hold the line at 25%.

But here's the problem. There is no basis for mutual understanding across the Atlantic on an appropriate *exchange rate* between these different currencies of power. The logic of this position is the European Union should be serious about ESDI and invest considerably more money in military power (the Robertson option). The reality is there is no support in any major European political party for this.

Greater reality still is that economic power is still the *small change* of global influence in the world today. In part this is a result of the terms of engagement set by the United States since

the 1990s: which saw an extraordinary era of US military intervention, starting with the invasion of Panama in 1989; the projection of US power from Kosovo to Somalia; 200,000 air sorties launched against Iraq alone; and now the war on terrorism and its extension to the 'axis of evil'.

The dilemmas this raises for European governments were acute. First, the US is likely to continue to take them for granted. Europe will be expected to do peacekeeping on the grounds that superpowers don't 'do' peacekeeping or economic reconstruction, or that it is not the responsibility of the First Airborne Division to help children across the road.

At the same time, Europe itself is likely to be of diminishing importance in America's world view as eyes are turned in the war against terrorism to the sources of terrorism in Western Central Asia. In such a case the EU will have to invest even more in its own defence at the risk of doing even less globally, and may even have to come to terms with Russia (the necessary partner in the Balkans if the Americans do indeed pull out). In his Mountbattan Lecture, George Robertson called European security 'a work in progress', but clearly it is a work which is likely to involve the Europeans more than American.

Thirdly, as for NATO itself, it faces an ultimate dilemma: its relevance. The US may wish to take it into a new world of 'anticipatory self-defence', or to move the terms of engagement with the rest of the world from deterrence to dissuasion. It is unlikely that European governments will wish to follow.

And the US itself faces a dilemma. If successful hegemony does indeed rest on consent and not merely coercion, consent has to be generated and maintained. Constant references to the exclusive or exceptional interests of the United States will not undermine American power but will further diminish its soft power (its authority in the world at large). The Europeans are still America's only real partners in the management of the global economy, in peacekeeping and in diplomatic coalition-build-

ing. But these assets can only be put at America's disposal if its policymakers invest in a multilateral rationale for its own dominance. Nothing at the beginning of the twenty-first century makes European support for the hegemony less important than before; but nothing in Bush's State of the Union address suggests that the present administration understands how best to maintain that hegemony when, and if, the war against terrorism is won.

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