

New US Strategy and Impact of Iraq War

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Introduction

It should now be clear to anyone that the war in Iraq had nothing to do with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or with any threats to America's security, direct or indirect. Similarly, there is little evidence to show that Saddam Hussein had links with any terrorist movements on America's watch list. Yet, in the face of stiff opposition from several of its allies and without the sanction of the United Nations (UN), the USA chose to go to war, something which nation states resort to only when their vital interests are seriously threatened. It is, therefore, obvious that Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' was undertaken to serve long term strategic interests of the USA and that the reasons given for the provocation were only a means to the end. In order that America's motivations should be better understood, it is necessary that the larger issues should be seen in the correct perspective.

Effects of 11 September 2001

There is a view that the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 mark a watershed and that they are a defining moment in the strategic thought processes of America. It has been argued that, on this day, the USA has moved from the threat of Communism to the threat from Islam. Just as the former was sought to be contained in the 50 years following World War II, the latter will be confronted in the next 50 years. In fact, this confrontation would be undertaken with greater hostility and aggressiveness because of the asymmetric advantages enjoyed by the rogue states and non-state actors. Thomas Friedman, writing in *The New York Times* on 9 January 2004 mentions that 11 September 2001 should be seen as the day on which World War III began.

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The other view is that nothing has changed in substance though 11 September 2001 may have acted as a catalyst and speeded up the process of unilateralism in America's policy. Changes in the country's thought processes had begun much earlier, soon after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The argument goes that the Gulf War of 1991 was as much for the liberation of Kuwait as for sending messages about America's overwhelming military and technological capabilities. This war was followed by other unilateral and aggressive demonstrations of the USA's new approach in the cruise missile attacks on the camps of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and on the alleged chemical weapons manufacturing facilities in Sudan. These attacks were not carried out by precision bombs dropped from aeroplane, which many countries can do but by Tomahawk cruise missiles launched from ships and submarines which can be done only by the USA and its main ally, the UK. And, finally, in the war in Kosovo, America acted unilaterally, and without the sanction of the UN. These demonstrations of preemptive and unilateral measures took place before 11 September 2001 and not after it. So, while the terrorist attacks in New York and in Washington may have traumatised the country and contributed to stiffening of resolve, the shift in strategies actually predates that event.

New US Strategies

There are several articulations of American strategy, beginning soon after the end of the Cold War, which point to the shift in its view of the world and of its position in it. It would suffice to consider only two. One of these is the Clinton White House document of October 1998 which outlines a National Security Strategy for the New Century and the other, the Bush National Security Strategy of September 2002. The two documents represent the thinking of two different administrations, one of the Democrats and one of the Republicans, and two different time frames. One is before 11 September 2001 and the other, after it. A study of these two documents reveals no significant difference in perspectives or of strategies. The thrust of both is that the USA should be the pre-eminent power in the world and that the global political and economic orders should be consistent with its interests. It should also remain overwhelming and superior in its military and technological

capabilities which should remain beyond challenge. It should have unrestricted access to and influence over critical raw materials and energy resources, these being essential inputs to the economies of the 'free world.' Clinton had argued that proliferation of WMD must be prevented and Bush now calls for the same through the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Both argue that promotion of democracy is a core US objective even as both have dealt and are dealing with authoritarian governments. Clinton was equally firm on combating terrorism, establishing that it predates 11 September 2001 while Bush takes 'preemptive and preventing action' a notch further by arguing that it is necessary because rogue states and non-state actors are not persuaded by deterrence. Both advocate proactive US leadership in the new world order.

It is remarkable how similar these two documents spelling out US strategies are. The language used in them is different; more suave and sophisticated of the Clinton presidency, more direct and harsh in that of Bush, but the substance and essentials are the same. In sum, both desire that the USA should :-

- (a) Oversee an international political order, which is responsive to US's interests.
- (b) Promote a free and globalised market environment in which US's interests are safeguarded and enhanced.
- (c) Have access to and influence over critical raw materials and energy resources.
- (d) Have sole control of sophisticated technologies so that its military superiority can remain unchallenged.

Since these are, by implication, vital national interests, it follows that should any of these be seriously threatened, the USA would not hesitate to go to war, alone (unilaterally?) if necessary.

In 2003 the Pentagon carried out a net assessment to identify possible challengers to the US preeminence in 2025. Its conclusion was that only China can be in a position where it might pose any challenge. If we add this to what has been discussed above, the focus of America's concerns becomes clear. In the immediate and

foreseeable future, terrorism, from rogue or immoderate states and non-state actors, will threaten the US national interests. In the longer term, the challenge could come from China. Both the immediate and the long term concerns need to be addressed. It is in this overall context that the US strategies need to be viewed.

Emerging Security Environment

With the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and neutralisation of the communist threat in Europe, the focus of global security environment has shifted to the Asia-Pacific. The main concerns of the USA are located here. The 'immoderate' or 'rogue' states, almost all of them Islamic, are littorals of this region. The non-state actors, or terrorists, are mainly present in this region spread across the Middle East, South West, South, Central and South East Asia and receive patronage and funding from these states. The region holds 65 per cent of all oil reserves in the world and 35 per cent of gas. The economies of Japan, India and many other nations are critically dependent on the oil and gas lifeline from the Gulf. The USA, itself, imports 20 per cent of its energy needs from this region. Even China is now an importer of Gulf oil with a rising demand. Production levels, pricing, routing and safe transportation of energy have, therefore, become very important.

Then, there is China. With a billion plus population, strategic capabilities and an economy which will be the second largest in the world in the next two decades, China is seen as the only possible challenger to the US supremacy in the long term. Its linkages with Russia, India and other potentially important countries can further enhance its leverages. It is also a very large market for American manufacturers and has, therefore, to be engaged and contained at the same time. In this overall background, American presence and involvement in this region is now seen as a strategic necessity.

The USA has military presence in East Asia (Japan and South Korea), South Asia (Pakistan and Afghanistan), Central Asia (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) and South West Asia (Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia). It also has an alliance with Taiwan and strong political and economic linkages with the countries

of South East Asia. Its allies, Australia and the United Kingdom (UK), have had military alliance with Malaysia and Singapore through the Five-Power Defence Agreement. In effect, there is a chain of the US military presence spread right across the Asia-Pacific. In addition, America has very strong naval forces at sea, both in the Indian Ocean and in East Asian waters, capable of applying decisive capabilities in support of the US objectives anywhere in the region. This Asia-Pacific presence is seen as critical to immediate and long term US interests. It enables the USA to :-

- (a) Apply pressure on 'immoderate' states to moderate or democratise, consistent with the US interests.
- (b) Exert pressure on non-state actors and on states seen to be supporting them.
- (c) Influence, if not control, energy resources.
- (d) In the long term, contain China.

Some Other Considerations

There has been a general feeling that the emerging US strategies have emanated from a strong lobby of neo-conservatives (neo-cons) who hold important advisory positions in the Bush administration, formal or informal. This may well be so but as has been highlighted earlier, there has been little change in the US position between the Clinton and Bush periods or before and after the 11 September 2001 attacks. Both terrorism and threats from proliferation of WMD pre-date the Bush Presidency and pre-emption is also not the invention of the present administration. If the action by Bush in Iraq in 2003 was unilateral and unauthorised, so was the action in Kosovo in 1999 by Clinton. The reality is that there has been continuity in the US strategy over the last decade, ever since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The pre-eminence of the USA can not be wished away and it is most unlikely that the situation can change in the next two decades. Further, there will be an element of unilateralism and aggressiveness in the US postures and countries will need to recognise this and engage America on these terms. There is no other way.

Another aspect concerns the relevance of domestic opinion and opposition from allies. The assessment that domestic discord as seen during the Vietnam years will force America to soften its positions is optimistic. Street demonstrations can be organised easily and should not be exaggerated. Invariably, the American people have supported the use of military for American values e.g. democracy, freedom etc. It is only necessary that an "evil" be identified and Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Milosovic etc have been painted as such. This is one reason why successive US Presidents have been able to go to war so easily, to liberate the people from the persecution of their evil leader. Similarly, American people will always be supportive of their military deployed in the field and will seldom be possible for either of the two major political parties to oppose this as has been seen during the war in Iraq and even now. As far as opposition from allies is concerned, the USA would like to have their support but, in the present environment, is unlikely to be inhibited in its choices should it not be available. In any event, as recent events have shown, countries which opposed the intervention in Iraq had no hesitation in falling into line even before it ended. France, Russia and Germany had opposed the war vehemently and had not allowed the UN Security Council to give to the USA the sanction that it needed, even threatening to veto the resolution. Yet, soon after the war began, all three countries expressed themselves in favour of a quick victory and ouster of Saddam Hussein. They have also agreed to America's request to waive off Iraq's debts despite the fact that they have been excluded from the list of countries which would be offered construction contracts in the rebuilding of infrastructure in Iraq. So, while opposition from allies cannot be glossed over, its effect should not be exaggerated. It is not likely to cow down the USA which would be quite prepared to act unilaterally if required.

Impact of the Iraq War

Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' was terminated in April 2003. Some may argue that the war is still continuing and that America has lost more soldiers after the war than during it. It is also argued that terrorist threats to the country may actually increase because of the war. Other complexities such as 'body bags' coming home, have also been highlighted. The desire of the Kurds in northern

Iraq for independence would have adverse repercussions on the territorial integrity of Turkey and Syria which have their own Kurdish elements. Similarly, should the Shias of Iraq gain ascendancy and link up with their co-religionists in neighbouring Iran, the situation could have implications on stability equations in South West Asia. 'Body bags' are, no doubt, an important concern in the USA but the composition of the enlisted military is no longer what it was in the Vietnam era and it is most unlikely that the country would abandon its vital interest on that account. But these are not core issues. The reality is that the USA has achieved its strategic objectives which took it to Iraq. The 'evil' has been thrown out and the people 'freed'. An America friendly temporary regime has been installed in Baghdad and is certain that the new constitution and the new 'democratic' government which follow will be as amenable to the US interests as the present Council is. The USA has now obtained the most suitable presence in South West Asia. It is in a position from where it can pressurise immoderate states and the effects of this pressure on countries like Syria, Iran and Libya is already visible. There is similar pressure on Saudi Arabia and on Pakistan. They all have to reform and become 'moderate'. The pressure on non-state actors can also be better managed from this central location. The USA also has control of Iraq's oil. Iraq has the second largest reserves of oil after Saudi Arabia and America will now have flexibility in its oil leverages versus the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting States (OPEC) cartel. It is not inconceivable that pressures will now be put on Saudi Arabia to fall in line with the production and pricing needs of the USA. The war in Iraq has also enabled America to 'promote democracy', first in Iraq and subsequently, in other Islamic states which have not shed their authoritarian and immoderate systems. And after Iraq, the USA has the kind of presence it needs in the Asia-Pacific to meet its long term strategic objective, the containment of China.

Impact on India

For India, the impact is different. From being on the periphery of America's concerns, not even on the radar screen as Robin Raphael once said rather fatuously, it is now in the very centre. Overwhelming American presence in our immediate vicinity is a reality which has already led to pressures, some of them forcing

us to alter long held positions in relations with Pakistan. Similarly, possible military options have been seriously circumscribed. But there is also good news. In an Asia-Pacific dominated by overwhelming US presence, the potential for military conflict between major nation states has decreased sharply unless it suits the interests of the super power. So, military threats to India's security have diminished. The ability of countries like Pakistan to promote terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir or elsewhere in the country has also decreased. India and America share common interests in the safe movement of commerce, especially energy, in the shipping routes of the Indian Ocean and this injects a convergence in the relationship. Finally, the US influence over Gulf oil is not inimical to India's interests; it may even be advantageous. But if India is to make use of the developing environment, it must have capabilities which will be meaningful to the larger players and credible to the others. The nuclear posture has enhanced our political leverages while economic growth will make India an important Asian country. In the same vein, we must have credible military capabilities, especially at sea. The Prime Minister's remark that India's security concerns are not just on our land frontiers but stretch from the Gulf coast in the west to the coast of South East Asia in the east, points to the growing need to enhance our maritime capabilities.

Conclusion

It will be realistic to assume that the present environment of dominating and unilateral American postures will continue in the foreseeable future, certainly for the next two decades. But sooner or later, things must change. The USA may find that it is overstretched in its anxiety to maintain its pre-eminent position. As the bigger countries and economic groupings develop their economies, they will tend to become essential to the growth of the US economy. A network of growing economies can temper the present unilateral trend. Just as military networking was the essence of the Cold War, economic networking will be the key element of international relations in the first part of the new century. India has some points of difference with the USA such as in nuclear matters, access to cutting edge technologies and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) issues. But it also has some cards of its own. The influential Indian

diaspora is one of them. India is also a resource pool for information and knowledge based industry with as many as 100 of the Fortune 500 companies having research and development established in India. It is a reasonably large market and its economic growth will make it one of five or six largest economies in the world in the next two decades. These strengths cannot be ignored, even by a country as omnipotent as the USA. It is, therefore, inevitable that the world will change, from one in which overwhelming unilateralism holds sway, to one in which there are quite a few reasonably strong players. But this will only happen if these nation states, ours being one, recognise the existing realities and shape their strategies to adjust to them, not losing sight of their long term interests.

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