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The war on terrorism

Regime change in Iraq was supposed to be a contribution to the war on terrorism in three distinct ways. First, by removing a state sponsor of terrorism that allegedly had links to al-Qaeda and might supply such organisations with weapons of mass destruction; second by sending a message to other potential state supporters of terrorism and thus deterring them from doing so; and third by taking a first step toward the democratisation of the Middle East, which in the long run would help dry up the sources of terrorism.

At this point, it appears that the first effect was minor at best, because Saddam does not appear to have had the links with al-Qaeda that many in the Bush administration alleged. The Iraqi regime no doubt had a record of support for terrorism, of which its announced incentives for Palestinian suicide bombers was an egregious recent example. But if the primary target of the 'war on terrorism' was meant to be the 'terrorists of global reach' that could and would conduct massive attacks against the United States, then removing Saddam was a minor contribution at best. In that sense, if anything the war in Iraq was a significant distraction from the war on terror: it diverted massive military, intelligence and financial assets away from missions on which they would have been better deployed. As regards the *direct* threat from global terrorism, the United States would have been better off focusing on the stabilisation of Afghanistan and the hunt for al-Qaeda than on the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

As for the deterrent effect on terrorism, the record is so far mixed. The Bush doctrine of using or threatening force against rogue regimes – strongly reinforced by the sight of Saddam Hussein being pulled out of a hole by the US military – may well have had a salutary effect on the leaders of terrorism-supporting states. But it can also be argued that the costly American occupation of Iraq actually makes military threats against other regimes

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less rather than more credible. US diplomacy is discredited and the US military is overstretched by its occupation duties in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iran, three times as populous as Iraq and historically averse to American intervention – leaders must feel reasonably confident that the United States will not soon seriously contemplate an 'Operation *Iranian Freedom*' followed by a US occupation. Nor, tragically, has the invasion of Iraq led Palestinian militant groups to abandon terror tactics out of fear of US power. Almost by definition, non-state terrorist actors like al-Qaeda itself will not be deterred by regime change in Iraq, though they could be inspired by it.

If regime change in Iraq is really to make a major contribution to the war on terrorism, then, it will have to be through the third mechanism – the transformation of the Middle East. And on that it is really too soon to say. It is possible that Iraq will, within a few years, emerge as a relatively humane, stable, semi-democracy, with legitimate institutions and a real prospect for future prosperity and freedom. If so, that would certainly take some of the thunder away from the Islamic extremists who exploited arguments that the United States was causing Muslim suffering by imposing sanctions on Iraq and leaving a ruthless, secular dictator in place. If that enormous political challenge cannot be met, however, and Iraq requires indefinite American occupation – or, worse, disintegrates into violence among its rival ethnic groups – the invasion will have proved not only unnecessary but counter-productive, at least where the war on terrorism is concerned.

The Greater Middle East

The Iraq war's effect on the Greater Middle East will similarly depend almost entirely on the outcome of the political process in Iraq. If Iraq does manage to develop into a relatively stable and prosperous democracy, it could serve as a model and inspiration for other democrats in the region. It could prove that Arabs are capable of democracy and development if only they are given the chance.

The problem, however, is that building a stable democracy in Iraq will be an enormously difficult task. In the best of circumstances it will take years or decades to achieve and even if successful the positive effect on the rest of the Middle East is still far from

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guaranteed. Iraq's lack of democratic traditions or institutions, the legacy of decades of dictatorship, rival ethnic and religious groups, and unevenly distributed natural resources are not a good recipe for democracy or stability. There is a risk, then, that without an indefinite international military presence, the country will eventually revert to authoritarian leadership of one form or another, or perhaps worse, to violent struggles among rival tribes or ethnic groups. Even if things work out better than that, the positive effect on the rest of the Middle East will be far from automatic. In Turkey, other than Israel the region's most successful experiment with democracy, it has taken over 80 years to progress to the current democratic order, which still faces challenges from ethnic separatism, Islamism and a powerful military establishment. And even Turkey's impressive degree of success has not spilled over to the rest of the Islamic world.

Strong proponents of the Iraq war would argue that even if Iraqi stability proves elusive, the war will still have had a positive effect on the region through the message it sent to dictatorships elsewhere – at a minimum regarding their WMD programmes. Just as the case with the war on terrorism, however, the evidence on this is mixed. The demonstration effect of attacking Iraq because of its unwillingness to verifiably disarm probably will serve as a deterrent to states like Iran, Syria and Libya, which will have to think twice before defying the United States by producing WMD.

But just as is the case for the war on terrorism, the effect of the Iraq war on WMD cuts both ways. Indeed, whereas the Bush administration claims that the Iraq war contributed to Libya's decision to abandon its WMD programmes – and possibly also to Iranian and Syrian restraint in this area – that effect is still unclear. Some of the regional progress on WMD in fact seems more to be the result of regional leaders' desperate desire to overcome international isolation than of fear of a US attack. Certainly Libya's WMD decision is the result of a process that began well before Bush took office. After long negotiations with the Clinton administration, Gaddafi handed over the suspected Lockerbie bombers in 1999 in an attempt to get UN sanctions on Libya lifted. Similarly, Iran seems to have agreed to suspend uranium enrichment – in a deal with British, French and German leaders last autumn – because of the credible threat of EU trade and diplomatic sanctions.

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On balance, regime change in Iraq is probably a positive step for the Greater Middle East, because at least it removes a long-standing threat to regional stability and at least gives a chance to political progress in Iraq. But the genuine political transformation of the region will require decades of difficult and coordinated engagement by the United States and its partners, not just the removal of one bad regime.

The European Union's role as a global actor

The Iraq war was a major setback to the European Union's quest to emerge as a global actor. The war revealed the deep divisions among European states regarding the use of force in international relations, the role of the UN and, most importantly, the best way to deal with American power. It also revealed the lack of a strong institutional mechanism for uniting various European national views and policies – the member states made policy on Iraq individually. The EU's status as a global actor should perhaps not be judged by its performance on Iraq – perhaps the most difficult test imaginable – and in a number of other ways the Union is making progress toward a Common Foreign and Security Policy. But the Iraq war was a sharp reminder of how far away the EU remains from having the ability to play as a major, unified actor on the world stage.

It is important to note that the real factor of division among EU members (and prospective members) on Iraq was less the question of Iraq itself than the question of how to deal with the United States. Most European publics, and governments for that matter, agreed with the basic European consensus that Iraq was a problem but that it was best dealt with through containment, and that the UN weapons inspection process should be given a chance to work. The difference among them was that leaders of most EU countries – indeed all except France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg – seemed to conclude that supporting US leadership and maintaining good relations with Washington was more important than opposing the war in Iraq.

Given the importance of American power and leadership on almost every issue in the world today, overcoming this structural difference among EU members will be difficult. EU member states' interests and perspectives on most important international issues are in fact quite similar. But France and to a lesser extent

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Germany seem to believe that the EU must have and sometimes use the option of building up Europe's autonomy and opposing US power. Britain, Spain, Italy and the new Central and East European members seem to believe that a strong transatlantic link must be preserved at almost any cost. So long as this fundamental difference persists – and there is little reason to believe it will disappear anytime soon – any EU attempt to stand up to the United States on a major strategic issue seems likely to lead only to major divisions within the Union. It will also encourage the United States to deal with European member states bilaterally rather than with the EU itself.

Transatlantic relations

It is an understatement to say that the Iraq war did enormous damage to transatlantic relations. The war confirmed each side's worst stereotypes of the other: many Americans saw Europeans as pacifists unwilling to takes issues of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction seriously, and many Europeans saw Americans as trigger-happy, unilateralist and militaristic. While most European governments ended up supporting the United States, most European publics did not, and certainly the relationships between Washington and the two EU capitals that most strongly opposed the war – Paris and Berlin – deteriorated to levels not seen in the postwar period.

The question is whether this deep setback to the Atlantic Alliance is permanent – the result of powerful structural trends – or merely the latest in a long line of sometimes very serious transatlantic crises that will be followed by a restoration of transatlantic cooperation. There is certainly some evidence that the problem is structural and the damage potentially enduring. Not only did the United States and some European governments disagree on Iraq, but the gap in public opinion on both sides was wide. The end of the Cold War means that Europeans and Americans no longer feel the same degree of vulnerability to a common threat. Rising US power has left the United States more responsible than Europe for maintaining world order, and has left many Americans feeling that they no longer need allies to achieve their strategic goals. Having been the victim of such devastation on 11 September 2001 and feeling more insecure since at least the

Cuban missile crisis, the United States is not prepared to subordinate its perceived security interests to relations with even long-standing allies. So no one should believe that the problems in the Alliance will be easy to fix.

At the same time, the Iraq crisis was made more severe than it needed to be by the particular personalities and policies of both sides, and this sort of clash among allies is unlikely to be repeated. Iraq was in many ways a *sui generis* case – there are not many other serious candidates for US-led preventive war. Whether or not a different US administration would have gone to war against Iraq we will never know, but it seems certain that Bush's political priorities and approach to relations with allies makes the transatlantic gap seem wider – perhaps much wider – than it really is. Moreover, the 'lessons' of Iraq, though different on both sides of the Atlantic, should push the two sides closer together. The Americans learned (or should have learned) how hard it is to replace a malevolent regime with something both more just and more stable, and that doing so in opposition to key democratic allies is even more difficult and costly. They also learned that US power and conviction alone are not enough to convince allies to follow along – sometimes diplomacy and compromise may also be necessary. The Europeans learned (or should have learned) that the result of efforts to oppose the United States on international strategic issues – especially when the United States has a plausible case for action – is not a unified EU standing up to America, but a divided EU that has little effect.

It is thus not impossible to imagine the EU and America overcoming their differences and working constructively together, even on Iraq. Elsewhere in the war on terrorism they are already doing so – judicial and intelligence cooperation is good, and in Afghanistan US and European forces are working successfully side by side. Eighteen months ago any NATO role at all in Afghanistan seemed highly unlikely; today NATO, including with French troops, is leading the international security force there. NATO has also agreed to set up a rapid-reaction Response Force – again including French participation – that could be used for out-of-area missions, including against terrorist targets. And in Iraq itself, signs of transatlantic cooperation are already starting to emerge. A large number of EU states, of course, are already part of the US-led coalition, and are providing troops and money for Iraq. But even opponents of the war like France and Germany have

started to send signals that they could play a greater and more cooperative role as conditions change. Both are now committed to substantial debt relief and considering training missions for Iraqi police and security forces, and both have stated their openness to a NATO role in Iraq. If sovereignty is transferred to an Iraqi government on schedule in the summer of 2004, and if the UN takes on a greater role in the country, the conditions will be in place for France and Germany to actively participate in the reconstruction of Iraq – and for both sides to put the crisis of 2003 behind them.

The international system

The Iraq war was a setback to the international system and world order as much as it was a setback to transatlantic relations. The UN Security Council was shown to have returned to the paralysis that characterised it during the Cold War. France, Germany, Russia, and other members of the Security Council were unwilling to back up resolutions with force, and the US ended up leading a war in Iraq without a direct mandate. Thus the hope that the Security Council could play a primary role as an arbiter of international peace and security – as it did in the first Gulf War in 1990-91 – proved unfounded. And the lesson for many Americans was that if the UN system could not enforce rules and deal with threats, and if NATO was also unwilling to do so, the United States had little choice but to act on its own.

The United States has a strong case that in a world of mass terrorism and weapons of mass destruction proliferation, the old rules of world order – non-intervention in internal affairs or a requirement for Security Council approval – do not work very well. The role played by the Security Council in the first Gulf War, in fact, was more the exception than the rule – the UN had never really played a major role in global security before then because of the Cold War, and it never really did afterwards either. In Kosovo in 1999, even most Europeans agreed that there were certain goals – such as preventing a humanitarian disaster – that mattered more than UN approval, so they intervened without a UN mandate. When inaction can lead to devastation on a massive scale, it is hard to see how a vulnerable great power like the United States will accept not to act simply because the Security Council – made up of less threatened and even undemocratic states – does not agree.

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Europeans are right, of course, to worry that accepting this principle could easily turn into a blank cheque that the United States – or other powers – could abuse. If not the Security Council – or at least NATO – than who should decide if intervention is justified? If the United States can act not only against imminent threats but against even emerging potential threats, why can't Russia (against Chechnya) or India (against Pakistan) or China (against Taiwan) or Israel (against Syria)? Many Americans have been too blithe about assuming that because 'America has always stood for freedom' or because 'America is good', the world should accept that American decisions on preventive war will always be sound.

What is urgently required is a serious dialogue, among not only Americans and Europeans but also among all the world's major players, on new rules and the basis for legitimacy of military intervention. The answer to the question of when force is legitimate has to be somewhere between the Europeans' 'only when the UN says so' and the Americans' 'whenever we say so'.