

**“Fast Forward to the Past?  
The Line in the Sand from Iraq to Iran”  
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Wars are cataclysmic events. Taking a country to war is among the most solemn responsibilities that a government has. First because it puts one's soldiers at risk of death and injury, second because it asks one's soldiers to kill complete strangers on government orders, third because it kills many civilians caught in the cross-fire, and fourth because the immediate and long-term consequences are both very grave and largely unpredictable.

So many “turning points” have been hailed in Iraq over the last three years that it is no surprise to discover that the great Middle East project is going round in circles. Perhaps this also explains why governments have had to master the art of spin.

My intention in this paper is neither to rake over the passions of the Iraq War, nor to examine the challenge posed by Iranian moves towards uranium enrichment, possibly as a prelude to acquiring nuclear weapons capability. Rather, my purpose is to examine how the Iraq War has damaged the capacity of the international community to fashion a robust collective response to the Iranian challenge.

### **1. The United Nations and Iraq**

Iraq shows that it is easier to win a war without UN blessing than win the peace afterwards – but victory in war is pointless without a resulting secure peace. Reasons for the failure of the world community to support the Iraq war included deep doubts over the justification for going to war; anxiety about the human toll, uncontrollable course and incalculable consequences of war in a volatile and already inflamed region; and profound skepticism about the US capacity to stay engaged – politically, economically and militarily – for the years of reconstruction required after a war. The war's legality, legitimacy and impact on UN-US relations will be debated for years to come. This matters because the fabric of orderly relations between nations, the health of the human right norm and the struggle for a better world are built on respect for international law. The belligerent countries insisted that the war was both legal and legitimate, based on a series of prior UN resolutions and the long and frustrating history of combative-cum-deceitful defiance of the UN by Saddam Hussein. Others conceded that it may have been illegal, but they were still prepared to support it because it was nevertheless legitimate, as with the Kosovo war in 1999, in its largely humanitarian outcome. Yet a third group insisted that the war was both illegal and illegitimate, and hence their strong opposition to it.

In a matching vein, there were three views on the significance of the war for the UN-US relationship: that it had demonstrated the irrelevance, centrality or potential complicity of the UN. Driven by moral clarity, the Bush administration was determined to distinguish good from evil in order to promote one and destroy the other. For some American neoconservatives, because it exists, the UN deserves to be disinvented:

Saddam Hussein's reign of terror is about to end. He will go quickly, but not alone: in a parting irony, he will take the UN down with him...the fantasy of the UN as the foundation of a new world order. As we sift the debris, it will be important to preserve, the better to understand, the intellectual wreckage of the liberal conceit of safety through international law administered by international institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The second point of view acknowledged the need to confront Saddam but rule out acting without UN authorization. From a test of UN relevance, the agenda shifted to being a test of the legitimacy of UN action: what sort of world we wish to live in, who we wish to be ruled by, and if we wish to live by rules and laws or by the force of arms. Few outsiders were convinced of the case for war. Little evidence linked Saddam either to 9/11 or to Osama bin Laden. Saddam had been successfully contained and disarmed and did not pose a clear and present danger to regional, world or US security. Two things were widely believed to follow from contrasting US policies towards Iraq and North Korea: Iraq lacked nuclear weapons; North Korea does not have oil.

The third argument accepted UN authorization as necessary, but not sufficient, and preferred UN irrelevance to complicity. Arguably, the United Nations had already allowed itself to become complicit in the Anglo-US strategy to try to provoke Iraqi defiance as a pretext for war. This is indicated in the now-infamous Downing Street Memorandum. Because it was necessary to create the conditions that would make an invasion legal, "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy". Imagine if the government of any country insisted that someone was guilty and must be hanged. The evidence of his guilt would be produced only after his execution, and the nature of his offence (murder, rape, treason) identified only after the evidence had been collected posthumously. In the same way, Washington reversed the unusual sequence of trial, conviction and punishment. The outcome was predetermined: a swift and heavy military defeat leading to regime change in Baghdad. The justification (WMD, involvement with international terrorism, humanitarian atrocities) came after the fact and was changed from WMD to liberation theology. Hence the following from one US critic as the tumultuous year drew to a close: the United Nations is "now more than ever reduced to servile function of after-sales service provider for the United States, on permanent call as the mop-up brigade".<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Goals Contradicted by Means**

Washington had six great claims for the war on Iraq; each was badly undermined by the means chosen. Their collective damage to the Empire Lite enterprise is greater than the sum of their separate parts.

Iraq's WMD ambition had been checked and contained by UN inspectors. As recognized by Senator Byrd, "we may have sparked a new international arms race as countries move ahead to develop WMD as a last ditch attempt to ward off a possible preemptive strike from a newly belligerent US which claims the right to hit where it wants".

Second, "there was no al-Qaida in Iraq before the arrival of US and British troops. Now fundamentalists are descending like spores of anthrax on the gaping wounds

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Perle, "Thank God for the death of the UN", *Guardian*, 21 March 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Cockburn, "It Should Be Late, It Was Never Great", *The Nation*, 22 December 2003, p.9.

torn open by the war”.<sup>3</sup> The occupation of Iraq played into the hands of US enemies ideologically, tactically and strategically.

Third, how does one instill democracy in an inhospitable terrain by punishing friends and allies who dared to exercise their democratic right to dissent from a war whose justification still remains contentious, while rewarding dictators who lent ready support? The whole enterprise of liberal imperialism rests on nostalgia for the lost world of Western empires that kept the peace among warring natives and provided sustenance to their starving peoples. This is at variance with the former colonies’ own memory and narrative of their encounter with the West. The neoconservatives believe that US power can be exercised assertively to project and promote American values as well as protect US interests. But democracy cannot be imposed in Iraq by bombers, helicopter gun ships and tanks. The global expansion of democracy has not been a pillar of American foreign policy; the rhetoric of democracy is an expedient justification in support of other more traditional goals. What answer to those who claim that aggression abroad was matched by repression at home? “The Russians were mocked for protecting their economic self-interest, while Halliburton positioned itself at the center of Iraqi reconstruction”.<sup>4</sup> Madeline Albright sadly concluded that “democracy is getting a bad name because it is identified with imposition and occupation”.<sup>5</sup> IN the UK, Iraq laid bare the democratic deficit that failed to check a policy of belligerence against the expressed preference of the majority of the people.

Fourth, the legal basis for going to war continues to haunt the three belligerent governments. Was it unlawful, amounting to a crime of aggression?

Fifth, against the backdrop of US rejection of the ICC and active efforts to undermine it, the denial of basic justice at Guantánamo Bay and the history of supporting and arming repressive regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere, Saddam’s trial will be “of dubious legality and questionable legitimacy”.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, it is difficult to see how one country can enforce UN resolutions by denying the authority of the world body, denigrating it as irrelevant and belittling its role in reconstruction efforts after the war.

### **3. Liberation As a Collateral Benefit**

Saddam Hussein is gone, and the people of Iraq are freed of his tyranny – that is a decided benefit. But this does not trump all other considerations. He may be gone from power, but the death and disappearance squads are back on the streets as the country spirals downwards inexorably into civil war. Saddam’s removal is a collateral benefit amid the carnage of destruction to the agreed principles and established institutions of world order. It is difficult to be joyous at the descent from the ideal of a world based on the rule of law to that of the law of the jungle – though one can see why the lion would welcome such a change.

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<sup>3</sup> George Galloway, “These are Blair’s last days”, *Guardian*, 3 May 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Heinbecker (Canada’s ambassador to the UN at the time of the Iraq war), “Washington’s Exceptionalism and the United Nation”, *Global Governance* 10:3 (July-September 2004), p.277

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Solomon, “Questions for Madeleine Albright: State of the Secretary”, *New York Times*, 23 April 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Hanny Megally and Paul van Zyl, “US justice with an Iraqi face?”, *International Herald Tribune*, 4 December 2003.

Victory in Iraq came at the price of relegitimising wars of choice as an instrument of unilateral state policy. How are we going to prevent the proliferation of the unlawful and unjustified use of force, of going to war as an instrument of state policy by other countries, as seen most recently in Lebanon? To argue that military victory bestow legitimacy is to say that might is right, and the ends justify the means: two longstanding Western taboos. Few will accept the doctrine that the administration of the day in Washington can decide who is to be which country's leader, and who is to be toppled. The veto may be an outmoded relic of the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War Washington has wielded the veto most frequently.

Not only do claims advanced to justify the war not stand up; the balance sheet has also to include the many and substantial damaging effects of the war. First, of course, the casualties. More than 2500 US soldiers have been killed. People usually frame an argument in terms of the risks to the lives of their own soldiers. The greater moral cost is asking one's soldiers to kill large numbers of others on the basis of suspect claims. Is the total civilian-military casualty 100,000, 200,000, fewer, or more? The number of civilian deaths in July was 3,438: an average daily toll of 110 that was almost double the January tally.<sup>7</sup> What precautions should be taken to ensure that a coalition of the willing does not become the coalition of the killing? By refusing to count Iraqi dead and wounded, the coalition countries have painted themselves as heartless and indifferent to the deaths and sufferings of the very people they came to liberate from Saddam.

The UN stands double damaged. Many say it failed the test of standing up to a tyrant. Many more say it failed to stand up to the superpower in defense of a country that posed no imminent threat to any outsider.

The relationship between the UN and the US is badly frayed. Yet they need each other. A completely pliant UN would indeed become irrelevant, even to the US. Deputy SG Mark Malloch Brown notes that Washington tolerates too much UN bashing and stereotyping and fails to keep Americans informed of the extent to which the UN is useful to US goals, preferring instead to make use of the UN "almost by stealth". As a result, "Much of the public discourse that reaches the US heartland has largely been abandoned to its loudest detractors".

Trans-Atlantic relations have been damaged. When the major European nations objected that the case for war had not been proven beyond reasonable doubt, instead of dialogue they got bad-tempered insults. The neoconservative ideologues "regard allies not as proof of diplomatic strength but as evidence of military weakness".<sup>8</sup> Friends and allies must avoid both slavish obedience and instinctive opposition; be prepared to support Washington when they are right despite intense international unpopularity; but be willing to say no to Washington when they are wrong, despite the risk of intense American irritation.

European unity was shattered and the single European project shaken. The characterization of old and new Europe was mistaken. Against the backdrop of European history, France and Germany standing together in resisting war is the new Europe of secular democracies and welfare states built on peaceful relations

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Wong and Damien Cave, "July was the Deadliest Month of War for Iraqi Civilians", *New York Times*, 16 Aug 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Cook, "Bush will now celebrate by putting Falluja to the torch", *Guardian*, 5 November 2004.

embedded in continental institutions. Old Europe was built on balance of power policies that led to two world wars.

The US has been deeply divided from world opinion, with a startlingly precipitous worldwide decline in US global leadership. US soft power has been eroded. Muslims are embittered, sullen and resentful. One of the more poignant comments came from outgoing Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. His biggest regrets, he said, were that they did not stop 9/11 and afterwards, "instead of redoubling what is our traditional export of hope and optimism we exported our fear and anger. And presented a very intense and angry face to the world".<sup>9</sup>

US credibility suffered a calamitous collapse with the publication of abuse photographs from Abu Graib, reflecting a systemic malaise. Washington is yet to regain the moral high ground lost with the pornography of torture.

The US people are domestically divided with an edge to their opinions that is quite disheartening for all well-wishers of the country and all who recognize that the American role in world affairs as a great and virtuous power has been historically unique, essentially beneficial, generous to a fault and both vital and necessary.

The military has been damaged as an institution in a manner reminiscent of Vietnam. General Greg Newbold: the decision to invade Iraq "was done with a casualness and swagger that are the special province of those who have never had to execute these missions – or bury the result". The consequence of the military's silence was that "a fundamentally flawed plan was executed for an invented war", "while pursuing the real enemy, al-Qaeda, became a secondary effort".

The credibility of the British and US media has suffered a slow but steady erosion on their coverage and analyses of the Iraq War. Media critics were held accountable for minor flaws and gaps in stories, but officials whose spin, dissembling and incompetence caused large-scale deaths and killings in an unnecessary war got medals of freedom. "Embedded journalists" and "Judith Millered" will be among the memorable journalistic legacies of this war.

Iraq contributed to the dramatic narrowing of the humanitarian space for nongovernmental actors.

Finally, the net result of all this has been a distraction from the war on terror. The administration indulged its *idée fixe* on Saddam Hussein at the cost of letting many of the real culprits behind 9/11 get away. For months, with the focus sharply and almost solely on Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden in effect became Osama bin Forgotten. Al-Qaeda was on the run, badly demoralized and universally stigmatized after 9/11. Iraq fragmented US military and political efforts, ensnared it in a military and diplomatic quagmire, regained sympathy to the fundamentalists' cause and fresh recruits to their ranks, renewed their sense of mission and purpose, and generally turned a strategic setback into a fresh opportunity.

#### **4. Does the Line in the Sand Run from Iraq to Iran?**

Washington has eliminated Iran's two big regional rivals, the Taliban government in Kabul and the Saddam regime in Baghdad. With an enemy like the United States, why should Iran wish for friends? Given its strategic location between them, and its

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<sup>9</sup> Greg Sheridan, "Reflections of a straight shooter", *Australian*, 20 January 2005.

vast population, Iran could make life vastly more interesting for foreigners in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Having been caught out crying wolf on WMD in Iraq, should leaders complain about a ho-hum response to the newest dire warnings of the same threat? In a 15-nation poll of 17,000 people, more people in more countries considered the US to be a greater danger to world peace than Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions. The Washington-based Pew Research Centre attributed this to the continuing fallout from Iraq.<sup>10</sup> In a complementary poll, 36 percent of the Europeans identified the US as the greatest threat to world stability.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, with nuclear neighbors to it west, north and east, and large numbers of American military forces all around it, what is a prudent national security planner to recommend to the Iranian government? To abandon or accelerate the nuclear program if one exists? A Guardian columnist writes of "belligerent machismo" as "the default mode" of US engagement with the world.<sup>12</sup> Tehran could even cloak its actions in arguments since the Kosovo war that legitimacy is different from and on a higher plane than mere legality. Cf Richard Perle: In going to war against Iraq, a major argument was that in the international jungle, international law, if there is such a thing, cannot trump national security. Advocates of robust national postures argue that global regimes are unreliable instruments of security, international law is a fiction, and the UN is an irrelevant nuisance. Countries have to rely on their own military might to avoid becoming the victims of others. The NPT was negotiating from another time and another world. In the harsh world of the international jungle, the only reliable route to ensuring national security is through national military might, including nuclear weapons.

Where we teach and lead, will others not learn to follow? If any one country can justify nuclear weapons on grounds of national security, so can others. Given the spread and deployment of nuclear powers and hostile military forces all around it, and the history of belligerent statements directed at it, purely on security calculations, Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent is no beyond comprehension. It was attacked by chemical weapons – a weapons of mass destruction – by Saddam Hussein during a war in which Baghdad's aggression remained unpunished by the West, but a commercial Iranian airliner was shot down with no penalty for the officers and country responsible. How different would have been the regions' and world history if the West had supported Iran in fighting and defeating Iraqi aggression in the early 1980s!

Tehran portrays its actions as consistent with its NPT right to acquire nuclear technology and materials for peaceful purposes. The NPT requirements, for all its brilliant success in having contained the nuclear genie for over three decades, reflect the technical and political world of a bygone era. More and more countries are bumping against the nuclear weapons ceiling even while the world energy crisis is encouraging a move to nuclear power. In the meantime, the escalating price of oil,

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<sup>10</sup> Ewen MacAskill, "US seen as bigger threat to peace than Iran, worldwide poll suggest", *Guardian*, 15 June 2006.

<sup>11</sup> John Thornhill, Daniel Dombey and Edward Alden, "Europeans see US as threat to global security, says poll", *Financial Times*, 19 June 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Simon Jenkins, "If this is Ahmadinejad's bluff, it is bluff worth calling", *Guardian*, 10 May 2006.

fuelled by the ongoing Iraq insurgency and resulting interruptions of oil production and supply with fears of further shortages, has swelled Iranian coffers and strengthened their bargaining position against threats of international sanctions.

What if President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad agreed to seek an advisory opinion from the World Court on Iranian and US compliance with NPT obligations, on condition that both undertook to abide by the Court's legal conclusion?

The five NPT-licit nuclear powers regard their Article 6 promise as rhetorical but treat nonproliferation as a binding and enforceable obligation. The contradiction has come to a head. If we are serious about putting a stop to the developing nuclear threats, then either the nuclear powers must promise faithfully, and act promptly, to dismantle their nuclear stockpiles to a publicly declared timetable. This would convert the NPT from a nonproliferation into a prohibition treaty.

Or they must articulate a post-NPT worldview that discriminates between responsible and criminal regimes, showing why some are less nuclear-equal than others. The nuclear cooperation deal between India and the US begins to do just this. This transcends an anachronistic NPT and bases the threat on a series of inflammatory statements and incendiary steps by Ahmadinejad since he became president.

## **Conclusion**

The Iraq experience confirms that, as with terrorism, a war of aggression is an unacceptable tactic no matter how just the cause. The fall from grace of an America that was the object of everyone's sympathy and support after 9/11 is nothing short of astonishing.

The ouster of Saddam Hussein flowed from strategic not ethical calculations of foreign policy. The United States is a great power, and a great power has strategic imperatives, not moral ones. To accuse it of double standards and hypocrisy thus misses the point. The State Department and Pentagon are not branches of Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International. Washington is motivated to act internationally not because it cares about foreign people, but because it cares about its own interests. The US is consistent in its foreign policy, remarkably so: but strategically consistent, not morally so.

Meant as an awesome demonstration of limitless American firepower and will power, Iraq turned out to prove the limits of American power. An Iraq that was meant to showcase the birthplace of the democratic crusade in the Middle East became its graveyard instead. Thus President Vladimir Putin responded to President Bush's suggestion that Russia should become more democratic with the wry comment that "We certainly would not want to have the same kind of democracy as they have in Iraq".<sup>13</sup>

The coalition of the dwindling face an acute dilemma: should they withdraw and risk an immediate descent into chaos, anarchy and civil war, or will their continued presence ensure a slow but steady slide into an insurgency-fuelled chaos and anarchy? They can neither stay put, taking casualties to no apparent purpose; nor go forward militarily in an unwinnable war; nor turn back politically for fear of the damage to their military and political credibility.

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<sup>13</sup> *Newsweek*, (international edition), 24 July 2006, p.5.

All of which might put the ball firmly back in the UN's court. But has the UN's authority been enhanced or diminished by the Iraq war? What is to stop other leaders from mimicking the bumper sticker argument about not needing a permission slip from the United Nations to defend one's country? To those who uphold the law themselves shall be given the right to enforce it on others.

The United Nations, built to preserve peace, is not a pacifist organization. But if force is used unwisely, prematurely or recklessly, the chances of its use plummet when it is both necessary and fully justified. In the end this is the most damning indictment of those who entangled us in the Iraq misadventure: that it distracted attention from the real threats and dangers sapped the will, corroded the collective capacity to confront genuine challenges, and emboldened those who might otherwise have remained more cautious to become more brazen. The United Nations cannot contemptuously be brushed aside as irrelevant and disposable in one crisis, only to be lifted out of the rubbish bin of history, dusted off and put to use in another.

The world is a better and safer place for all of us (1) because the Cold War was fought, how it was fought, and who won – US power prevailing in defense of American values; and (2) because the United Nations exists, what it does, and what it symbolizes – the ideal of an international society based in human solidarity, grounded in law and ruled by reason. Therefore the world will be a better and safer place for all of us if the indispensable superpower and the indispensable international organization work in tandem, not at cross-purposes, with force put to the service of law.