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Whither the Bush doctrine?

by Rod Lyon

With Congressional criticism of the war in Iraq mounting, and the Bush presidency now deep into its fourth quarter, speculation is increasing about the future trajectory of US strategic policy. Bush has been responsible for a major reformation in that policy post-September 11, articulating a doctrine of proactive use of force. Within that doctrine, the ideas of preemptive and preventive use of force have often gained most public attention, but the broader contours of the doctrine place a greater emphasis on the direct use of force—the return of strategic policy as a contact sport, as it were, rather than as an abstract contest between risk-averse great powers. The doctrine has been both controversial and polarising, within the United States and beyond. In particular, debate over the doctrine has quickened as the Coalition's position in Iraq has deteriorated.

The result of last year's mid-term US elections, and the early salvoes of next year's presidential election, show that US strategic policy is a contested and divisive issue. *Time* magazine claimed in last year's election preview that the election was 'all about George W Bush and the world he's created.' The Republican Party's losses were therefore seen as an electoral backlash against Bush, and a harbinger of the more important electoral outcomes in 2008. Moreover, the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld as US Secretary for Defence—even before the ink was dry on the election returns—suggested that some readjustment to US strategic policies was imminent. With Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld and Feith out of the immediate policy circles, the intellectual core of neoconservatism fracturing,[1] and the Iraq Study Group about to issue its report, it seemed the logjam in US strategic policy was about to break up.

But it didn't. Bush wasn't prepared to walk away from his own doctrine. He seems no more ready to do so today. Some may see this as mere stubbornness. But it's also possible that the doctrine has greater staying power than its critics concede. Those critics have for some time been predicting the doctrine's demise. Robert Jervis, one of the doyens of international relations in the United States, penned an article in 2005 entitled 'Why the Bush doctrine cannot be sustained'.[2] Subsequently, in an issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Philip Gordon from the Brookings Institution argued that Bush's 'revolution' had essentially had its day.[3]

So what are the prospects for a major reorientation of US strategic policy, either post-2008 or more immediately? That question engages a series of important policy issues. What sort of world leader will the US be in the future? What expectations will Washington have of its friends and allies?

How well 'bedded down' is the notion of transformation in US strategic and defence policy? In short, how durable is the Bush doctrine?

What do we mean by 'the Bush doctrine'?

There is a definitional problem here. When we ask whether the Bush doctrine will endure, what exactly do we mean by 'the Bush doctrine'? Some have unkindly described it as akin to the Rorschach inkblot test—the Bush doctrine is, apparently, whatever you choose to see in it. Robert Jervis identified the Bush doctrine as an ambitious foreign policy agenda characterised by four elements:

- promoting democracy
- countering the terrorist threat
- a preparedness to take preventive action to deal with these dangers, and
- a willingness to act unilaterally when the need arises.

Even a casual survey of those characteristics reveals that the individual key strands of the doctrine can hardly be thought unique. Democracy promotion has long been a prevailing trait of US foreign policy, albeit one followed more or less evangelically by different presidents. And countering terrorism isn't new, though Bush may well claim to have countered it more robustly than other presidents. Being willing to act preventively or unilaterally is also not new, although John Lewis Gaddis argues those concepts are less familiar to Americans who grew up in the 20th century than they would have been to Americans of an earlier era.

Moreover, some might want to argue with Jervis's list of key elements. Does a willingness to act unilaterally when the need arises equate to a strategic preference for unilateralism? For the Bush administration has generally been relatively open about its preference for partnerships. It has actively courted a democratic Russia and a rising China. It has tried to form coalitions of the willing to counter the terrorist threat. And it has engaged existing institutions and multilateral fora across a wide range of issues from the six-party talks on North Korea, to allowing the EU3 to make the running on the Iran nuclear issue, to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

To its critics, the Bush doctrine often connotes a particular simplicity in policy-making, a simplicity in which grand objectives are undermined by poor implementation. That certainly seems to be the charge that is frequently levelled against the administration over Iraq, for example. But this weakness has also been something of a traditional feature of US grand strategy. Indeed, some analysts see that weakness as a standard failing of the United States: that it sees its grand values so clearly that tactical considerations are often poorly developed before a policy is implemented.[4]

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The problem of defining the Bush doctrine is made no easier by the fact that the second-term Bush administration looks different to the first-term one. Bush's public recantations in relation to the tone of his earlier arguments on the War on Terror ('It was wrong to say terrorists were wanted dead or alive') suggest that the administration has tempered some of its presentational positions in the interest of building a broader community of support for 'the long war'. Still, we should not underestimate the extent

to which there are elements of continuity that flow across the two terms. So far, the declaratory documents of the second-term Bush administration—like the *National Security Strategy* 2006 and the *Quadrennial Defense Review* 2006—suggest an effort to 'lock in' important changes in US strategic policy that have emerged since 2001.

So we need a clear focus on what 'the Bush doctrine' is. Some clues to a better definition can be found in the short-hand labels that analysts have generally devised to describe Bush's grand strategy. Pierre Hassner, for example, once called the Bush doctrine 'Wilsonianism with boots', thereby pointing to its linkage with a strong moral tradition in US foreign policy as well as its predilection for the use of military force. Walter Russell Mead described the Bush strategy as a variant of Wilsonianism where values had been put on steroids and institutions thrown aside. And Gaddis called the doctrine 'Fukuyama with force'. The common thread across the descriptions is easy to see; the conjoining of moral purpose and direct military power. It is this theme that is the dominant *motif* in the Bush doctrine—and it does much to explain the administration's determination that the US will remain the world's dominant conventional military power. So when we ask about the durability of the Bush doctrine, in essence we are asking about the extent to which this theme will continue to shape US strategic policy in the coming years.

Change and continuity

In a practical sense, the newer and more radical aspects of the Bush doctrine are seen most easily by contrasting the Bush strategy post-September 11 to the grand strategy pursued by the US in the Cold War years. Then the US faced an adversary that was predictable, ponderous, risk-averse, and knew well the terrible cost of great-power war. Over time, the superpowers devised a series of 'tacit rules' to manage their relationship. And US allies accepted and shaped the terms of US leadership. From all those elements, the world derived a sense of great stability, an important factor in a world characterised by rapidly escalating nuclear arsenals and the prospect of Armageddon. US strategic doctrine during the Cold War could perhaps be defined as the conjoining of realist purpose with indirect—or, if I can steal a term from Robert Art, 'gravitational'—military power.

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The transition from the Cold War model to the Bush doctrine was facilitated by a decade of profound uncertainty within the United States about the value of primacy and the purpose of grand strategy. Mead once labelled the 1990s as 'the lost years' in American foreign policy.[5] During those years some openly questioned the value of primacy and asked what it was good for. In an article written for the *US Naval War College Review* in 1998, Jervis argued that the US no longer needed a grand strategy, nor could it have one, and nor should it have one. The US could have all its principal objectives for free, he claimed. Attempting to formulate a grand strategy in an age when no first-order strategic challenge existed, said Jervis, would be a 'mission impossible'.[6] In large part, Jervis's 1998 assessment turned upon the dominance of second-order strategic threats in an uncertain strategic environment, and a judgment that 'superpowers don't do windows'.

After the events of 11 September 2001, some degree of reinvention in US grand strategy was inevitable. In relation to the principal

bearings of US grand strategy for the years 1945–2001, the Bush doctrine is clearly revisionist. It is unlike the Cold War strategy: it accepts no peer competitor, believes that deterrence has a more limited role to play in relation to risk-tolerant opponents, and is almost as interested in failing states as in strong ones. Gravitational uses of force remain important, but they are no longer sufficient to address first-order challenges to US security. US policy now involves taking the conflict up to its terrorist adversaries, in part by promoting an agenda for political change in the Middle East. In a reversal of the strategic hand-wringing of the 1990s, the administration sees formative value in US primacy. And it regards as complacent the arguments made by Jervis in 1998 that the US can have all its principal objectives for free.

Deep traditions

But the Bush doctrine is a mix of both long-lived and newer elements. If we focus for a moment just upon the deep traditions, it is entirely plausible to argue that Bush's presidency is far from the anomaly that some claim it to be. In one important sense, US grand strategy will not change after Bush leaves office, just as it did not change when he entered office. As Mead has argued, for 200 years virtually all sides in the debate over US grand strategy have pursued one consistent objective: a secure US in a peaceful world order of prosperous and democratic states. Bush himself stands clearly in this tradition. So will the next president.

Indeed, Bush's strategic policy is entirely comprehensible within Mead's four traditional 'schools' of US foreign policy (Wilsonian, Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian). Mead's schools essentially differ on the most appropriate means of pursuing the US's grand strategic objective. The Bush doctrine is a clear blend of the Wilsonian and Jacksonian schools. But that observation isn't particularly helpful in determining the trajectory of US grand strategy post-2008. The schools offer a range of policy options so wide (everything from preemption to isolationism) that just about anything might conceivably be on the table.

The work of Caroline Ziemke is also informative in relation to the broader characteristics of US strategy. Ziemke is unique amongst security scholars in her attempts to apply psychological profiling to states, and so classify individual states according to their strategic 'personality'. A country's personality derives from three factors: its orientation to the outside world, the information it pays most attention to, and the basis upon which it takes decisions. The US's strategic personality is that of an Extroverted, Intuitive and Feeling (EIF) state and—in Ziemke's judgment—it will remain so during the 21st century. EIF states see their ultimate concerns as demanding engagement in the outside world, hold firmly to a set of principles which define their mission and their identity, and frequently make key strategic decisions on emotional rather than logical grounds.

But the notion of strategic personality, or even strategic culture, doesn't get us all the way to an answer about the trajectory of US strategy post-2008 either: for one thing, if strategic personality were a determining influence on strategic policy all presidents would end up with pretty much the same policy, or at least the same set of beliefs optimised to fit specific situations. The 'strategic culture' argument doesn't leave much space for individual decision-makers to make their mark.

Stephen Sestanovich has identified another important trait in US strategic policy over recent decades: the trait of 'maximalism.'[7] This trait identifies a tendency by the US to reach for the maximum it can achieve in

terms of a policy outcome. This observation has much in common with Jervis's claim that 'superpowers don't do windows'. The Bush doctrine is merely one form of maximalism. This argument has weight but not focus: maximalism by itself doesn't give much sense of the particular policies that a new president might attempt to 'maximize'.

Geopolitical realities

Because it stands in such sharp contrast to the Cold War model—a conjoining of moral purpose with direct military force in comparison with the conjoining of a realist purpose with indirect military force—the Bush doctrine has attracted heavy criticism from many strategic analysts of the Cold-War era. Those analysts see the doctrine as dangerous and unsustainable. Moreover, they believe that geopolitical realities—in particular the rise of China—will slowly force US strategic policy back to a course more similar to the Cold-War model. The Iraq War is frequently seen as the major learning curve of the Bush administration, with critics claiming that the war will at least have one positive outcome, because it will drive US strategic policy back to more familiar moorings.

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But is it mere weariness—in particular with the difficulties of Iraq—that is meant to spur strategic reorientation? Central to the Bush doctrine has been a belief that the Cold-War strategic model was essentially too static and defensive. Realism, and the indirect use of force (deterrence and containment, one might say) weren't thought to be a viable strategic response to new threats. A new president is certainly not going to 'withdraw' from the Middle East: the US cannot be indifferent to outcomes there. A new president might find ways of reducing US involvement in Iraq, but the real test is the one suggested earlier: is that president going to disavow the grand strategy of moral purpose conjoined with direct force as the principal strategy for the War on Terror?

Those who wish to argue that geopolitical realities will drive the US back to a more modest strategic policy can argue a plausible case. Great power tensions remain. The Middle East can't be transformed into a garden of democracy overnight. And US power assets are limited. But the defence budget is still running at only 4% of GDP, and the US could keep spending at that rate almost indefinitely. So it is not hard-power assets that might suggest a reorientation of policy but soft-power considerations: the 'view' of American power across the world, and the concerns about the US role in the new international order. If the US wishes to keep this role going, it will need better arguments about what it is doing and why, and will need to tell that story better in key localities, including the Middle East, Pakistan and Southeast Asia, to name just a few.

There is also a second worry about the Bush doctrine, and Iraq is the key example here. It is the worry that the strategy isn't working. This is a deep problem, because the reason for overturning the Cold War strategic doctrine post 9/11 was that it wouldn't be effective. The Bush doctrine faces a severe test here; it needs to get some 'runs on the board' in terms of effectiveness against the United States' new adversaries. But improving outcomes against those adversaries might well call for more transformation in US strategic policy rather than less—it is not at all clear that the US can enhance its

prospects in the War on Terror by retreating to the Cold War strategic model.

It is, in fact, the need to enhance the effectiveness of US strategic policy that appears to be the most compelling argument for change. The shift of the neo-cons, like Wolfowitz and Feith, out of the Bush administration and the recruiting of Robert Gates as Secretary for Defence, suggests a greater reliance on more 'realist' policy agendas, even for the remainder of the Bush administration. But it does not suggest a return to the Cold War's gravitational use of force. A recent piece by Ivo Daalder and Robert Kagan for the Stanley Foundation argues that three factors will help drive the United States towards a continued use of force more in keeping Bush doctrine than the earlier doctrine.[8] Those factors include the character of US foreign policy, the distribution of power in the world since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the nature of contemporary international challenges. 'Realism', argue Daalder and Kagan, will not slow the resort to US military action, and might even increase it. So the theme of strategic policy as a contact sport will probably survive Bush.

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What the return of the realists to the seats of power might well portend, though, is a lower profile for the idea that democracy can be successfully transplanted to a range of difficult recipients by using force to effect regime change. Iraq has probably sufficiently dimmed US enthusiasm for forceful regime change that Washington will be looking instead for opportunities to work with a range of states, including authoritarian ones, in order to improve outcomes in its War on Terror. That change won't mean the next US president is opposed to democracy promotion: indeed, increasing the number of democratic states in the world has such strategic appeal for the US that the objective cannot be tossed aside. But US policymakers will probably return to the notion that democracy promotion relies upon a slower and more stable path, one more astutely aligned with the evolutionary trajectory of non-Western societies.

US strategic policy post-2008

Bush was the commander-in-chief on 11 September 2001, and it might well be argued that his experience of those events was formative for his presidency. But will a succeeding president be far removed from the experience? The tempo of mass-casualty terrorism—including actual and attempted events—shows few signs of slowing. Brian Jenkins at RAND has observed that there have been more than 30 follow-on attacks since September 11, and the incidence of suicide terrorism is at an historical high point.

From the foregoing analysis, the best projection would be that both the current threat-pattern in international security and the extroverted US strategic personality will combine to ensure that US strategic engagement remains proactive and far-reaching even after the conclusion of the Bush presidency. The public statements by the announced candidates for each party's presidential nomination appear to reinforce the judgment that none is in favour of an isolated, embittered America.

After the problems of Iraq, it would be no surprise if a follow-on president was more

reluctant than Bush has been to commit US ground forces to open-ended missions in the name of democratic regime change. But given an on-going pattern of large-scale terrorist attacks around the globe, that succeeding president would be just as determined to pursue counter-terrorism, including through military options, and would not be prepared to disengage the US even from troubled regions like the Middle East.

So will the US move away from the War on Terror? In large part this will depend on whether some other organising principle emerges as a serious rival to the War on Terror in US strategy. None is immediately apparent. As John Ikenberry noted in 2002, 'the most important characteristic of the current international order is the remarkable absence of serious strategic rivalry and competitive balancing among the great powers.'[9] True, 2007 shows perhaps a little more acerbity in great-power relationships than was the case in 2002, but the thrust of the judgment seems still to be correct.

The judgment that the War on Terror will be a long war seems an accurate one...

In this sense, the world has not yet come to grips with the larger changes wrought by the events of September 11. The argument that RAND analyst, Brian Jenkins, advanced in 2004 is still substantially correct: 'We have yet to digest the full impact of these changes, seeing them as temporary tactical deviations, exotic interludes. We have barely begun to reexamine our obsolete assumptions about the way our enemies organize and operate.'[10] The judgment that the War on Terror will be a long war seems an accurate one, and if so it is likely to absorb the energies of many succeeding presidents, and not merely one.

Outlook

In brief, we should expect the next president to be a maximalist, entirely ready to act unilaterally and preemptively during crises, and better at thinking about grand strategic objectives in sweeping value terms rather than in narrow tactical terms. He (or she) could display all those characteristics simply on the basis of US strategic culture. That president could look even more like George W Bush on the basis of the structure of threats in the current security environment: namely, weak-actor terrorist threats are still likely to pose the most immediate threat to the United States, post-2008. So we could expect a president who would continue to push the cause of democracy on the difficult 'frontier' of the Middle East—albeit with less reliance on military force as the instrument of that objective—and continue to see the threat from terrorism as the US's primary strategic concern. A Democratic president might well attempt to run a more vigorous 'soft-power' agenda alongside the hard-power one in pursuit of those ends. But, in many respects, the next US president will look much like the one we have now.

Endnotes

1 See, for example, Francis Fukuyama (2006) *After the Neocons: America at the Crossroads* (UK: Profile Books)

2 Robert Jervis (2005) 'Why the Bush doctrine cannot be sustained', *Political Science Quarterly*, 120,3: 351-377

3 Philip Gordon (2006) 'The end of the Bush revolution' *Foreign Affairs*, 85,4: 75-86

4 See, for example, Caroline Ziemke, Philippe Loustaunau and Amy Alrich (2000) *Strategic personality and the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence* (Washington: Institute for Defense Analysis) IDA Document D-2537, especially p.57.

5 Walter Russell Mead (2004) *Power, Terror, Peace and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World as Risk* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), p.3

6 Robert Jervis (1998) 'US grand stategy: mission impossible', *Naval War College Review*, 51,3: 22-36

7 Stephen Sestanovich (2005) 'American maximalism', *The National Interest*, 79: 13-23

8 Ivo Daalder and Robert Kagan (2007) *America and the use of force: sources of legitimacy*, (Iowa: The Stanley Foundation)

9 John Ikenberry (2002) 'American grand strategy in the age of terror', *Survival*, 43,4: 19-34, at p.21

10 Brian Jenkins (2004) 'Redefining the enemy: the world has changed but our mindset has not', *The RAND Review*, 28,1: 16-23, at p.16.

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