

**Remarks to Foreign Policy Centre
Transatlantic Relations
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I want to focus on the U.S. strategic viewpoint.

I do think the strategic problem of managing the alliance is in the process of substantial change. It's a fairly roiling sea. I think the tensions reflected in this poll are already being transformed by events. A lot of damage has been done in the last three years to what may have been an erroneous, but I think was a nevertheless widely shared, assumption of common values that would result in largely aligned views of how to tackle common problems.

I tell a small anecdote about this. We did a cover the week before Sept 11: Where Have You Gone Colin Powell? Asking, essentially, why has this paragon, with huge standing even bigger than the president's, losing battle after battle with the neocons, not fought harder, not made the case for the brand of Bush 1 internationalism he clearly believes in? We interviewed one distinguished foreign policy hand, who was asked to complete the sentence, "Colin Powell is a blank secretary of state." And he said, "that's right, he is." Powell hated this story, still will not talk to our State Department correspondent.

Jack Straw told me after Sept 11, "Hmm, I think you might have done this a week too early."

Well, maybe – but maybe not. The best defense the Powellites put forward is that he was playing a very long game, waiting for events to push things in his direction – that an untested, ignorant president might be drawn by the siren song of the chest-beaters at first, but would be driven back as events transpired to a more sober, traditionalist foreign policy. Early in the administration, he did so on China, for example; after shutdown of the American plane, with the hawks wanting to escalate, it was Powell to whom Bush turned to get the US out of a bind.

But because of Sept. 11, it turns out to have been a very long game indeed. Powell could not stop (and probably didn't want to) the march to war against Baghdad, though he obviously, along with Tony Blair, was influential in getting Bush to go to the UN for both resolutions. He and his people, as is well known, have been frequently demoralized – losing on getting Bush involved in the peace

process until after the Iraq War, on having Rumsfeld be the public spokesman for the administration which did so much to rankle European opinion, and a million other smaller disputes, on the intransigence shown to the Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy, the 7th floor of the state department has felt very much under siege. I talked to a senior official there a year ago and asked, are you enjoying your job? And he said no. Why? "Because I don't like my colleagues in this administration."

All the same, the Bush Administration in September 2003 looks very different from the one a year previous, when we met last. The president still seeks certainty, talks in simple phrases that alienate his foreign audience. But we are past the high water mark of Bush unilateralism. We may get more of the rhetoric; indeed, we may still see the lack of a deep impulse or aptitude for building political coalitions on difficult subjects. But I think Washington is now done with actively breaking the crockery. And I think over time, this will tend to reset the transatlantic equilibrium closer to the relative comity we all somehow expect to be the norm.

Fundamentally, we have already reached the point of imperial overstretch. George Bush is not asking for help from the international community at the UN, limited though his concessions seem to be, or requesting 87 billion dollars from Congress because things are going swimmingly in Iraq. Indeed, they are going badly, getting worse, and American doctrine and operations are still having trouble getting to grips with the reality of Iraq. Intelligence is terrible; US forces are much blinder than their commanders want them to be, performing jobs that their high-tech advantages don't contribute much to. Indeed Iraq is attracting Al Qaeda and others from around the world who have the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as a clear model and have an almost infinite number of ways to bloody Americans and disrupt Iraqi life. Moreover, even the most optimistic assumptions of troop contributions from other countries will not begin to provide the numbers of soldiers needed to bring security; and apparently major numbers of Americans must leave by March or troop levels elsewhere will suffer; and of course there is also the built in dilemma that the more foreign the occupation seems, the more its opponents will have a case.

And for very different reasons, the Middle East roadmap is essentially a map to nowhere. The idea of trying to sideline Arafat, at least while he is alive, is not productive. The neocon vision of Iraq serving as a democratic beacon in the middle east—the "generational project" Condi Rice talks about—though courageous, combined with a reenergized peace process, is seriously far from delivery.

But as unpleasant as these results are, they consign the era of unilateralist preemption, I think, to the proverbial dustbin of history. The Powellites—not that they haven't made mistakes and overpromises of their own—must be on the ascendant again, because the rose garden the neocons promised the president is turning out to be thorny indeed. The idea that the US is going to attack Syria or Iran now seems silly. With Iran, with North Korea, the US, though there are fits and starts, now seeks essentially multilateral answers. Though there is nothing very multilateral in the way Bush is asking for help at the UN, more like a demand; and he does fundamentally believe that the UN showed itself irrelevant in the way it handled Iraq; it is still a climbdown.

People in Europe who see America's enormous power and become mesmerized by how much it exceeds all other countries' must remember that it is still directed by a man who must face voters and wants reelection. And his excellent adventure in Iraq has not bought George Bush much pleasure.

In some kind of weird reverse of the situation his dad faced in 2002, it looks like the US economy is going to be doing OK, but foreign policy will be a regular source of criticism of Bush's competence, judgment and honesty.

Bush's approval ratings are down to essentially pre-9/11 levels. One recent poll had them in the 40s; most show low to mid 50s. That is still pretty good, but it's a big drop for him, and the trend line is down. The abrupt U-turn on the time and expense of the occupation; the continuing mess in Iraq, the obvious lack of preparation for what actually transpired there, seriously hurt his reputation. Whereas the Republican argument against Democratic foreign policy was that it was flabby and ignored crucial problems out of fear of having to shed blood, there is now grist for the Democratic argument that Republicans jump on shadows, treating problems that are actually simmering as if they are at full boil. I think the approval numbers in this poll, taken in June, would be quite different in the US if taken today.

And even in this poll, taken months before the current difficulties, asked whether the Iraq war was worth it, still only 55% yes in America. Of course, this is a lot bigger than in France, 16%; but as we can see in the Democratic race for president, there is, still inchoate, material out there in the body politic to work with for those who think Bush isn't handling foreign policy right. A senior White House official told one of my colleagues last week that he understood the president had a "trust gap" that they now had to contend with. "You know," he said, "when a problem came up, we used to be able to give just one speech." If the President pointed to a problem and said he was going to tackle it, people believed it was tackled. That's not true any more. Bush's trust aura is not gone, but it is diminished.

And, as this poll also shows, there is another kind of congruence in US and European attitudes in that 77% of Americans want the US to be more engaged in the world, and in the increasing numbers of Americans who want Europe to take a leadership role in world affairs.

But there are lots of inconsistencies in these numbers. 69% of Americans think Saddam Hussein was behind the September 11 attack in some way, though no credible evidence has been presented to back up this assertion. What we used to call “soccer moms” in the last election, worried about domestic issues, are now “security moms” – generally worried that life is getting more dangerous. A poll last week showed that 82% of Americans think Sept 11 “changed things forever,” and there is an increase from a year ago in people who fear physical danger from a terrorist attack (from 15 to 24%).

You can argue that President Bush should be in a lot of trouble over his competence and veracity: not just because of uranium to Niger, but soft-soaping the numbers about how much the occupation would cost; the al-Qaeda plus Saddam argument; saying now that Iraq is the world center of terror; the rising budget deficits; as Senator Breaux said yesterday, why is it we are spending \$87 billion in Iraq, yet we can't afford a dollar to upgrade the security of our ports?

But in the disparateness of the Democratic candidates' criticism of Bush you can see that a sustained critique still comes hard. The patriotism unleashed by 9/11 lives, and its chief beneficiary is GW Bush. I quote that eminent foreign policy expert Britney Spears, who said over last week: “Honestly, I think we should just trust our president in every decision that he makes and we should just support that, you know, and be faithful in what happens.” I think that reflects the zeitgeist, a kind of Bush culture, which will give Bush considerable running room. He does not like to change his mind. I think he is committed to Iraq over the long term, quite seriously, because he believes what he says about Iraq being the center of terror; he glides it together with Indonesia, as if the US didn't invade Iraq, but nevertheless, I think he considers this his central mission on earth. But he is a ruthless politician, which is a good thing; reelection provides a reality principle that cuts through the ideology. He may not admit he has changed his mind – being the world's only superpower means never having to say you're sorry – but he can.

I think the question that leaves is, having decided that shiny military hammer does not any longer mean that all the problems are nails, does he throw himself into multilateral diplomacy, patient coalition building, mutually respectful conversations? I am sure it will get better. In some sense, this is finally that moment that Powell's supporters were telling us about 2 years ago, his chance to

take some tricks in his patient long game. But then, where have Powell and Rice been, who are supposed to be overseeing the roadmap as Bush's representative? How much energy have we really seen applied to North Korea? How much by way of real concession do we see in the US position over giving the UN authority in Iraq? Not a lot.

So my conclusion is, instead of what Madeleine Albright called and then regretted for domestic political reasons, "assertive multilateralism," we will have "tepid non-unilateralism" – to the other countries involved, it won't feel good, but it will at least be the absence of hitting one's head against the brick wall.