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## **Afghanistan as the harbinger of a New World Order?**

Many, many years ago a wise military historian and strategist built a whole theory around the premise that he who controlled the “heartland” of the Eurasian continent would have mastery over the fate of the whole of Europe and over all the lands spreading from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This is a heady thought given that the last quarter of the first year of the third millennium has seen the world’s current hegemon, the United States, wage war in a country that definitely lies in the heartland: Afghanistan. Does this fact indicate that we are on the brink of the creation of a new world order in which the United States proceeds to exert its control over areas of the planet it has previously had little interest in or power over? Perhaps not, but even so there are many trends and phenomena that we would do well to notice and analyse as we grope in the international darkness of post-Cold War confusion.

Whilst it may have been elevated to the level of conventional wisdom or common sense by now, it bears repeating that the Cold War was an era in which the forces that shaped international relations and conflict functioned in a fashion fundamentally different from today. During the period that extended from, say, the blockade of Berlin, to the breaching of the Berlin Wall, the threats, tools and tasks of nations were clear. The threat to Europe was the extension of Communist ideology on the continent, whether by election (possible in the early years of the Cold War in France and Italy), or by means of military attack. The price of that threat was high. If World War III were to break out, given the USSR and Warsaw Pact’s obvious numerical superiority, the West would have been forced to use nuclear weapons in order to redress the disparity in military might. Such an exchange would not have been unilateral, leading as it would have most certainly to Russian use of nuclear weapons. In fact there is good reason to believe that the Russians would have used their missiles first. Knowing that the West was sure to use its missiles, the Russians wanted to take the advantage, delicately calling this a “pre-emptive strike”. Of course, the consequences of such a scenario would have been unthinkable.

The remarkable thing is that for all the tensions of the Cold War there were very few instances during which such a military confrontation seemed more than just a possibility. In fact Cold War historians seem to be in agreement already that such instances number only two. The first was the infamous Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when Khrushchev was caught red-handed tipping the strategic balance in his favour in a most unstatesmanlike fashion by smuggling short-range nuclear missiles onto Cuban, just 100km off the coast of the US. The second was the period in the mid-1980s, when the KGB took President Reagan’s rhetoric of fighting the “Evil Empire” a little too seriously, seeing in it the signs of impending war (fortunately for all involved, the KGB’s paranoia was reigned in effectively with the help of the now famous KGB mole, Oleg Gordievsky, who at the time was working for Britain’s MI6).



Therefore, it is quite ironic, given the scale of the ultimate threat and the trillions of dollars and roubles spent on equipping either side that despite two instances over the space of almost 50 years, the Cold War had an eminently stable and predictable effect on international relations, at least the relations between the West and the Communist bloc. Whilst wars were fought on behalf of Communism and Democracy all over the globe, and whilst East German border guards had no qualms about shooting dead their own “comrades” as they attempted escape to West Germany, not one shot was fired in anger across the Iron Curtain by one bloc towards the other. Today’s international system lacks such predictability, or even stability. What can we say about it, though?

Remaining in the military realm, it seems that the new post-1990 era has brought a dichotomy to the way countries understand war. The experiences of developed, and undeveloped states in Africa, the Balkans and Central Asia have encouraged a gulf in the way wars are executed. On the one hand we have a resurgence of hoary military themes: war as a crude or unsophisticated exercise. Even here there exist degrees of differentiation. At the basest level we have a belief in atavistic, rural, tribal violence as demonstrated, for example, in Rwanda through the power of the machete. On the other end of the scale, and soberingly enough in the heart of Europe, we have the rediscovery of guerrilla tactics, but now merged with genocide, as demonstrated in former Yugoslavia. Even if one falls prey to the propaganda of Milosevics which called guerrillas militiamen, the truth remains that ethnic cleansing was in fact state-sponsored genocide: the systematic targeting of an innocent group simply as a result of their ethnic identity or religion.

On the other side of the new strategic environment, stands the United States and its military philosophy. Despite glaring yet rare failures, as in Somalia, the US has managed to develop and deploy an array of weapons and tactics which finally seem to be putting meat on the bones of the much overused phrase: “the revolution in military affairs.” With its operations in Serbia, Kosovo and now Afghanistan, the United States has managed to achieve its primary goals in each case with minimal, or zero loss of life amongst its own forces. With the use of over-the-horizon intelligent weapons, such as the pilot-less Predator aircraft, the US seems to have broken two fundamental laws of war: military victory costs blood as well as treasure, and true military success only comes when a man with a gun takes control of a piece of enemy soil.

In both cases I believe that whilst the results are indeed impressive, this is not due to the reasons that the US lists. In fact to this very day not one analyst or commentator has successfully explained why Milosevics surrendered when he did. The truth is that in comparison to the amount of money spent on aerial munitions by the US and NATO, the damage done to the Serbian army and the militia was disproportionately slight. As to the more recent example of Afghanistan, given the rapidity of the US victory, it is almost impossible to label the defeat of the Taleban a military defeat. Nowhere in the world could any force of such a size, no matter what the quality of its equipment, be defeated in the space of two weeks if it truly wants to defend its country. Far more likely a scenario is that the vast majority of the Taleban and al Qaeda fighters simply gave up the fight for domestic reasons of survival. If this is the case, then the United States may be drawn into a very dangerous misconception. Just because the Kosovo and Afghanistan campaigns were “easy” that does not mean that



the next campaign will be the same. If the opponent is committed to protecting his nation, if there is vegetation under which he can hide and rest – unlike in Afghanistan – then there is no reason to believe that Washington could not yet again be faced by a Vietnam-like fiasco.

In the meantime, however, the world will have to adapt, albeit it perhaps temporarily, to the new strategy that is already being called the Bush doctrine. The message from the White House is clear. If Washington believes a state to be harbouring or otherwise favouring a group designated by the US as being terrorist, then it can use overwhelming force against that nation, just as it did in Afghanistan, and just as it is rumoured to be planning with regard to Iraq. There are many problems with this doctrine becoming the core tenet of a new US foreign policy, or even new international system. The first is the clear unilateralism that it reinforces. It is no surprise that although the US pushed for NATO to finally bring article five of the Washington Treaty into force, that the subsequent mission was not a NATO mission. After Kosovo, the US has had enough of having Brussels and the Allies being truly involved in how it fights its wars. This is unhealthy in an alliance. The second issue stems from the first, and relates to the question of who decides who the terrorist is, or who the terrorist's friend is. Here there is no obvious safety value or yard-stick with which to temper or verify Washington's future decisions related to the use of force. Lastly, and most importantly, there is the issue of the message that the establishment of such a doctrine sends to many nations and peoples of the world.

Although unpopular an act, one must ask why America is so unpopular with so many countries and so many groups? It is for one simple and unfair reason. The world still consists of haves and have nots, the majority falling into the latter category. Many people think the degree of discrepancy between the two is patently unjust and is a product of the unbridled and rampant success of "market democracy" in a numerically smaller part of the world. This model is perceived to be self-perpetuating and disregardful of the needs of the less fortunate. In fact, as a criticism, much of this is true. Where the problem comes for Washington is that many of the people that perceive this injustice, also perceive America as being the motor and paragon of this cruel system. The fact that almost every nation of the developed West is culpable in its disregard for the world's poor and disenfranchised (with the exception perhaps of some Scandinavian nations) is rarely noted. The truth is that whilst we have conquered Communism and the threat of WWII, we seem powerless to help the 600 million children that live in absolute poverty, or the 1.2 billion people that subsist on less than one dollar a day.

Although it may be too soon to clearly describe and christen the new international system, it is clear that its constituents will remain that same for the foreseeable future. They will be the United States with its new global calling to unilaterally identify and destroy the terrorists it designates as such with the assistance of some close friends. Close behind will be the rest of the rich West and its "quite well off" periphery. Then will come the undecided or "half-developed" nations, such as Russia. Lastly, there will be the largest group, the underdeveloped and the poorest nations of the world. Until the first two groups come up with a meaningful way in which to relate to and assist the last group, there will always be a sense of injustice amongst many people in



that group. A sense of injustice that may lead to an irrational and violent fixation and a call to arms which could lead to attacks that dwarf those of September 11th.