Weakness in Wolf’s Clothing

by
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Last month two seemingly unrelated events demonstrated the debilitating dichotomy of contemporary American foreign policy. In the first, Secretary of State Rice testified at a meeting of the House of Representatives Appropriations subcommittee on state and foreign operations that the Bush administration does not have “an ideological problem with talking to Syria.” But, she added, “there just isn’t any evidence that they’re trying to change their behavior.” In the second event, Russian President Putin, speaking at the annual Wehrkunde international security conference in Munich, launched a verbal attack on the Bush administration, saying that the U.S. “had overstepped its national borders in every way . . . in the economic, political, and cultural policies it imposes on other nations . . . and [was dragging the world into] an abyss of permanent conflicts.” He also said the U.S. deliberately spreads weapons of mass destruction around the world and blackmails and manipulates its neighbors.

A Foreign Policy Straightjacket

Despite Secretary Rice’s protestation, of course the Bush administration has an ideological problem with talking to the Syrian government. The unacceptable behavior she is referring to goes right to the heart of an ideological (and policy) dispute between Washington and Damascus. The Bush administration is convinced that Syria is fomenting terrorism in Iraq and is thereby helping to undermine the (ideologically sound) democratic constitutional order that the Bush administration is struggling to establish there. Indeed, the Bush administration’s foreign policy is built on an inflexible, self-assured, self-righteous ideology that automatically proclaims some international actors worthy to deal with and others unworthy.

But, it had not always been this way. In 2000, when Rice was a foreign policy advisor to candidate George W. Bush, their campaign vowed to eschew the “ideologically-based” foreign policy of the Clinton administration that focused on
human rights and nation building and return to the real politik of national interest, emphasizing power relationships with other major states. For a very short time the new President and Rice, then his National Security Adviser, began to refocus American foreign policy. But, September 11 changed everything. Almost over night the Bush administration altered its foreign policy compass to the perspective it had rejected the year before. In so doing, it picked up much of the rationale of moral superiority that undergirds America’s manifest destiny and extended it to the whole world. The difficulty, which the new Bush administration found out quickly, was that their view of the world was badly out of sync with “ground reality.” The Cold War-inspired American view of how the world should be ordered and run was dangerously at odds with the emerging, increasingly differentiated post Cold War international system.

Pressing the Advantage

President Putin’s speech, which he would not have been strong or bold enough to make just a few years ago, takes aim directly at the Bush administration’s ideological approach to foreign policy. Three interrelated factors underpin Putin’s bravado. First, there is the catastrophic American failure to stem the tide of terrorism and civil strife in Iraq and establish a vibrant, functioning democracy there, especially since Washington has invested so many resources and put its reputation on the line to make this project successful. Iraq has been a major test case for the Bush administration’s determination to pursue its ideological commitment to recover “failed states” and build democracy. It is impossible to overstate how the Bush administration’s failure has stunned and dismayed authorities in the Middle East and emboldened exactly those forces the Bush administration has been trying to defeat.

The second factor is the growing economic, political, and military strength not only of such erstwhile enemies as Russia, but also contemporary antagonists such as Iran, Syria, North Korea, China, Hezbollah, and Hamas. In addition to increased strength in their own right, the inability of the U.S. to succeed in Iraq has taught these powers that the way to counter Washington’s rigid ideology is to make sure that they grow even stronger. In addition to recognizing that Saddam Hussein was strategically incompetent, the lesson of Iraq is that strength, not weakness, is the way to counter American designs and aggressiveness. Saddam Hussein’s “sin” was that he really did not have nuclear weapons to show the Americans and to use if necessary. His regime, protected by a fourth rate military, proved to be easy pickings for an overpowering American military assault.

Third, since the end of the Cold War and the ideological and policy conformity that it spawned between the U.S. and Western Europe, a growing estrangement has developed between Washington and some of its European allies. To be sure, there are times of trans-Atlantic agreement on specific issues, but with the absence of the unifying threat of the Soviet Union and in the face of America’s ideological intransigence and failure in Iraq, the trend will be toward more, not less estrangement. This lesson is not lost on other allies, such as the government of Lebanon and
democratic forces in Egypt, who believed the American message and counted on American power to secure not only Iraq, but to begin the process of democratization in the Middle East.

The combination of Washington’s ideological rigidity and the gathering strength of challengers have led to an American weakness in the international arena that we have not seen since just before World War II. To be sure, the chest thumping hubris of the administration will continue and there will be a continuing emphasis on the need to stay in Iraq and fight on until the terrorists are defeated. The soaring rhetoric about the need to extend democracy around the world will go on unabated. The administration will continue to cultivate an image of determination, strength and resolve. But, it is mostly a mirage—smoke and mirrors—and America’s challengers and antagonists, as well as many of its friends, know it. Seemingly, the only ones who don’t know it (or don’t admit to knowing it) are the policy makers in Washington. The cold reality is that the U.S. has lost clout, influence, and power in virtually every part of the world. Thus, ironically, it is exactly the administration’s efforts to extend and insist on using American power that have failed so miserably and come back to haunt us.

Let’s return for a moment to Russia. Secretary Rice expressed surprise and bewilderment at Putin’s speech and several political pundits suspected him of trying to return to the Cold War. But, Putin’s speech and his strategy are not all that surprising. Russian clout in it’s “near abroad” and in Europe is growing because it controls critical energy supplies for a huge area of Eurasia. Russia’s oil-based economy is booming, its GDP is growing, and many Russians are becoming wealthier. (Certainly, the growing wealth is not evenly spread through the society and corruption and authoritarianism continue to be important problems.) Moreover, at least for now, Putin seems to have halted the fracturing of the Russian state and has even been able to silence many critics by replaying old fears of being “surrounded by enemies.” Playing on the fear of enemies has succeeded, in part, because of NATO’s announcement that it will deploy an anti-missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic. In response to NATO’s move, Moscow has said it may pull out of the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Force Modernization Agreement and begin to deploy missiles in western Russia that could overwhelm the defensive system.

American weakness perhaps is demonstrated most palpably a bit further southwest. The adventure in Iraq has led to a downward spiral in American interests and strength throughout the Middle East. The rise and success of anti-American forces in Iraq is compounded by the withdrawal of some of Washington’s allies in the military engagement in Iraq, especially Great Britain, at just the time when the Bush administration is arguing that more—not fewer—troops are needed to quell the violence. At the same time, much to the chagrin of American allies in the region (particularly Saudi Arabia), Iran and Syria are exploiting the American misfortune and extending their power and influence into Iraq. Iran is also making new moves into Afghanistan. Ironically, the U.S. abetted this process by removing anti-Iranian regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and not being able to stabilize and unify an Iraqi state in place
of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Iran clearly has internal problems, but these problems do not appear sufficient to bring down a regime that is bolstered by substantial oil revenues and able to rally its people in the face of the dangerous American enemy at its doorstep. Moreover, U.S. weakness and its presence as a common enemy have fostered a tacit alliance between Iran and Syria, states that had a history of poor relations before the U.S. invaded the region. The U.S. now has no good options with respect to countering Teheran in particular and it is virtually certain that Iran will possess nuclear weapons if it wants them. The decision by the administration earlier this month that it will participate in a regional conference that includes Iran and Syria is tacit admission of Washington’s weakness and perhaps a sign that its policy is beginning to change.

American problems in the area extend also to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Secretary Rice’s trip to the region last month yielded nothing except an agreement that Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian President Abas would meet again. A major obstacle, reinforced by Israeli opposition, is once again American ideological intransigence that keeps Washington from exerting positive influence with respect to this issue. And now, Washington and Tel Aviv have been thrown further off course by the establishment of a Palestinian unity government between Fatah and Hamas. Hamas’ unwillingness so far to recognize Israel and renounce violence coupled with the insistence by Washington that Hamas accept all previous agreements related to the issue, including the Oslo Accords and the Road Map, are show stoppers. Rather than attempting to mediate between the two sides without preconditions, the Bush administration has scuttled hope of progress by insisting on conditions it knows will be unacceptable to Hamas.

A Lesson Learned

Perhaps the only major exception to this ideological pattern is the recent agreement to halt the development of North Korean nuclear capability. In this accord, North Korea agreed to end nuclear development and allow inspectors into the country in exchange for economic and fuel aid. Nonetheless, there are potential dangers for the Bush administration and the other parties to the agreement (South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia). Although Pyongyang agreed to end the development of future nuclear capability, it has not yet agreed to surrender its current nuclear weapons. Moreover, in accepting North Korea as a negotiating partner, the U.S. has accorded Pyongyang a certain legitimacy. But, none of these problems are unmanageable and there are enormous beneficial lessons to be learned from the Six-Party Agreement for dealing with the realities of the emerging international system:

• multilateral engagement works when all the parties have genuine interests at stake;
• good outcomes are not necessarily the enemy of perfect outcomes;
• compromising ideological rigidity can pay useful dividends;
• power is contextual—not absolute;
• war often is a poor substitute for intelligent negotiations;
• and, useful outcomes are possible without attempting to employ broad, dangerous, and ultimately unsuccessful socio-political engineering schemes.

Sadly, the overwhelming majority of the Bush administration’s foreign policy makers still have not learned the lessons of the Six-Party Agreement, even though as recently as two or three years ago, striking this deal with North Korea, with the involvement of others in the region, would not have been possible. The goal now must be to continue to work with North Korea to ensure that it—and we—adhere to the terms of the agreement and ultimately, to reduce the threat from both their and our nuclear weapons. But, most important, it is necessary to apply the lessons learned from this experience more broadly. There is time and hope, but not much of either.

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