

The year of living dangerously: US-Europe relationship in 2003¹

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1. From Castiglioncello IX to Castiglioncello X.

The last USPID Castiglioncello Conference was held a few days after the 9/11 terrorist attack to the US. As a participant in that meeting I remember the deep feelings of sympathy we all proved for our US guests and the sorrows for the innocent victims. Those feelings were common to many people in the world. In Europe they were the outcome of many decades of collaboration with the US. The Bush administration has been able to dissipate such a political capital with astonishing rapidity. The shift in the European public opinion has been observed by different surveys. A recent poll realized by the German Marhall Fund² shows that 49% of the Europeans judges undesirable that the United States exert strong leadership in world affairs, up from 31% in 2002. Global US leadership is described as desirable only by 45%³. A similar inversion of feelings has been noted also in other parts of the world. The rift with Europe however can have a major impact, in particular on NATO. The shift has largely produced by the divide between the US and the majority of the UN Security Council over the Iraq's war, but other issues played also a role.

This paper examines these dividing issues and the trends in the trans-Atlantic relations.

2. Iraq: The military and economic costs

The Bush administration deliberately dismissed the objection raised by important European allies such as France and Germany when it decided to go to war in absence of a UN resolution. Clearly it hoped in a quick victory. Anybody knew that the Iraqi Army

¹ The talk presented at Castiglioncello was edited by the author in March 2004, to take into account some new developments.

² Published on September 4th, 2003 by International Herald Tribune.

³ Looking at the different European countries one does note in general differences between the government position and that of the public opinion. For example, the percentage describing as undesirable a strong US leadership climbs to 70% in France, but only to 34% in Poland, which reflects the positions of the two governments. The only exception is Italy, where, in spite of the support given by the Berlusconi government to the Bush administration, 50% of the public describes as undesirable a global US leadership, up from 33% in 2002. The most dramatic shift is in Germany, where US critics passed from 27% in 2002 to the present 50%.

was no match for the US invasion forces and the outcome of the invasion came therefore as no surprise. The Bush administration appeared convinced that also the war's aftermath would have been a rather smooth affair, while its critics predicted a costly post-war settlement. We now know that not only the former, but perhaps also the latter were too optimistic. The situation in Iraq is increasingly complicated for the US administration and its allies. I leave aside the counting of US and allied victims. The major trouble for the US is the dynamics that has been set in motion. In the South, where the Baathists are less present, the US faces hostile Shiite factions. In central Iraq the Sunni areas are mostly without control. Also in the more stable North there have been suicide attacks, to say nothing of the potential collision line between Kurdish forces and Turkey. In the whole country there is no improvement in basic services and infrastructures. The overwhelming problem appears the lack of security, which affects also the economic prospects. To give an example, due to sabotage current oil exports have declined to \$500 million a month, about half of what expected.

The Bush administration is conscious of these setbacks. It has got at the end of 2003 a new UN resolution, although an ambiguous one. Moreover it asked and obtained from the Congress a \$ 87- billion package for Iraq. It is also trying to establish a more representative governing authority. The change in the George W. Bush policy is obviously motivated by the 2004 presidential election and the fear to follow his father course, from military victory to electoral defeat. November 2004 is however still far. The questions to be presently asked are different. For example: Will a UN involvement be helpful to increase the security in Iraq? Are the funds obtained by the Congress sufficient? Will the Bush administration be able to improve the relationship between the US and its allies?

As to the first question, if a new UN role means a substitution of military presence, it is hard to imagine how a patchy military force could succeed where the US failed and could overcome a guerrilla which is increasingly present on the ground and more and more effective in hitting military and economic and civilian targets. It is obvious that the US wants a US-led international force. Most of the forces now in Iraq are Americans. While other 30 countries have troops, for many of them the presence is only symbolic. One could wonder if a stronger international force will be used to protect the Iraqis or to defend the occupying army against growing national resistance. And it is unclear if a different occupying military force would be more efficient than the US military alone in restoring security in Iraq. Since UN is not respected by the Iraqi people, who do not forget the painful consequences of a decade-long embargo, the UN flag would represent little added value to the coalition. The UN might therefore have a role to play only in the framework of an agreed political settlement in Iraq, a settlement which still looks extremely difficult.

Let us examine the economic costs. According to the Pentagon the costs of the invasion were \$ 45 billions. The after-war costs are much more impressive. The estimated cost of maintaining troops is \$4 billion a month. This amounts to \$ 300 billions for a five-year occupation. As to the other costs, according to an estimate, based on post-war UN and US computations, the total economic – not military- costs, would total \$ 200 billions in a decade⁴. The package obtained at the end of 2003 from the Congress by George W. Bush contains \$20-billions to be used for reconstruction in

⁴ D. Hepburn, *Nice war- here's the bill* International Herald Tribune, September 4, 2003.

2004: \$6.6 billions to electricity, \$2 billions to repair the oil infrastructure; it also includes \$5 billions for salaries and equipment to a planned Iraqi army of 40,000. Other \$13 billions should be obtained in the same year by oil revenues, if, and it is a big if, the oil infrastructure will be not further damaged by sabotages.

Let us finally consider the last question. The divide between the US and its allies was not due to the insubordination of some European countries, as probably somebody in the administration thought. The rift was originated by different analysis on the role of the United Nations and the international law. A changed attitude of the Bush administration is not motivated by its rethinking of the role of the international laws and institutions and will do little to solve the differences. A stronger role of UN in Iraq may meet the present demands of the US and the position coherently maintained by France and Germany, but I do not think it will eliminate the differences. When Germany and France speak of a major role of the UN in Iraq they talk about “the transfer of power and sovereignty to the Iraqi people”, to use a sentence by President Jacques Chirac. And, as I mentioned already, this is a goal which is certainly not in view so far.

3. Iraq war and trans-Atlantic relations.

The failure of the Bush policy in Iraq is matter of concern for everybody, since the danger exists of a disintegration and civil war. This is why not only the US, but also Europe and Russia are so concerned. European countries have to move between opposite dangers. On one side the reticence to get involved in the Iraqi marshes is understandable; on the other they do not want a further deterioration of their relationship with the US. Another factor affecting European decisions is their impact on the Islamic world. A major consequence of the Bush policy towards Islamic countries will probably be the transformation of an innocuous academic prophecy, the S. Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” hypothesis, in a tragic reality. European countries have huge Islamic minorities within their borders. For example Islam is the second religion in France. Therefore the European interest is to have a good and not conflicting relationship with Islamic countries and to favour a moderate Islam in Europe. The consequences of the Iraq war have been so far quite the opposite. They have increased the Islamic radicalism in Middle East. In Iraq terrorists coming from other countries, Al Qaeda affiliates and Ansar al-Islam fighters are now fighting against US. A new generation of future terrorists is breded.

Another potential source of attrition is the Palestine-Israeli conflict. Differently from what Bush thought, freeing Iraq from Saddam has not given new chances to the peace process in Middle East. The whole Road Map is in a mess. Differently from the Sharon government view that Arafat has to be banished or perhaps killed, the Bush administration should turn to the ancient Palestinian leader to isolate Hamas and avoid catastrophe. There is no sign of this turn so far. Let’s hope that, when this change occurs, it will not come too late. Similarly to the Iraq resistance, the protracted struggle in Palestine acts as an incubator for terrorism that can be exported to Europe. This is why in the long run the amateurish style employed by Bush to handle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is detrimental to the European security and a potential source of new attrition as well.

The differences between the United States and the core of European Union; France, Germany Belgium and Luxembourg (and probably, when Italians get rid of Berlusconi, Italy as well) predated the rift on Iraq⁵, but have been strongly enhanced by the divide of the Security Council on Iraq. On the basis of the previous analysis it is unlikely that the rift can be shortened in the short term. A likely consequence will be a serious damage to the trans-Atlantic relations and the Atlantic Alliance. This is not the place to discuss this point in detail, but let me remind an immediate consequence of the divide, i.e. the proposal of a unified military EU command centre in the mini-summit of France, Germany Belgium and Luxembourg in April 2003. On September 2, Belgium said that it would go ahead with plans to build a European military command headquarter near Brussels, despite opposition from the United States and UK⁶. In spite of more recent developments, weakened relations within NATO are a likely outcome, if the reasons of conflict are not removed.

4. US and Europe

The US current account deficit for 2003 is \$500 billion; the surplus of EU about \$60 billion (that of Japan and China respectively \$113 and 35 billions). After the interruption of the Clinton's years, the strengths of the US seem increasingly based on its military power. On the contrary Europe is betting on the advantages coming from monetary union and further economic integration. Economic ambitions not supported by military means are politically fragile. There is an increasing awareness of this at least in France and Germany, as discussed in previous section. But leaving aside a common European foreign and military policy, which is certainly a distant goal, also economic strength may be a very effective political factor. As stressed for example by D. P. Calleo⁷, the emerging European power is not the outcome of a planned political construction, but the result of an aggregative growth; therefore so far the problem of the large nation-states belonging to the European Union has not yet been solved. This is a weakness, of which many commentators are fully aware. It produces incoherence in foreign policy, and cumbersome procedures to achieve consensus. To give another example, the emerging European political structure, as envisaged by the drafted Constitution, may miss clarity and unifying concept. Nevertheless it is adequate to European integration process, whose outcome, hopefully, will not be a superpower, but a loose political confederation with a strong cultural and economic unity.

In any case, as it stands today Europe seems much more in tune with the rest of the world on many issues, from environmental policy to the international law, from social legislation to arms control. To some critics of the US in the third world, the very existence of Europe is a reason of encouragement. For them Europe's economic strengths, together with her method of compromise and mediation, compares favourably with the military power, especially when the latter is not accompanied by adequate diplomacy. There are clear differences among the European states on many issues, but a

⁵ Other important points of disagreement are for example the Kyoto protocol or the international justice court

⁶ C.S.Smith, *EU military to get a home base*, International Herald Tribune, September 4, 2003

⁷ See the new edition of his book: *Rethinking Europe's future*, Century Foundation/Princeton University Press.

common political thinking there exists among the original six states of the Rome pact (France, Germany, Italy and Benelux), that incidentally are also at the centre of European economic power. The US makes mistake in encouraging European divisions. This policy can achieve only momentarily successes, but at the cost to alienate US from the inner European core.

5. Imperialism, balance of power, multilateralism

Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was proud to say: “Many foes, much honour”. In a similar vein, the Bushies are afraid of a lack of awe⁸ for the US, to use a sentence of one of them. Reading such a sentence it is impossible to avoid comparison with the words uttered by the Athenians ambassadors to the oligarchs of the small town of Melos when they refused to surrender to the overwhelming forces of the Athenian maritime empire. Thucydides reports this famous dialog in V, 84-116. To the Melos rulers who ask: Would you choose our friendly neutrality instead of our hostility? the Athenians answer: Your hostility is not as harmful to us as your friendship. In fact the latter would be a clear proof, for our subjects, of our weakness, whereas the former is symbol of our strength.

Athens was a radical democracy, as opposed to the rival Sparta: Thucydides’ analysis is devoted to the discovery of the mechanism which induced this democracy to become warlike and imperialistic. The explanation was a historical necessity that led Athens first to become too strong, then to exercise an hegemony over her subjects and eventually to transform hegemony into dominion and oppression. We can be doubtful of the historical law of *ananke* (necessity) that the great Greek historian assumed to hold, and we can also doubt that each act of hubris must be followed by its own nemesis. Therefore, as most of the historic analogies, also the comparison between the imperial Athens and the US empire might be misleading. The evolution of the American empire might proceed along lines completely different from Athens. In particular the US society has economic and social needs that are hardly compatible with the overextension of American military presence. Although manipulated by the ruling aristocracy⁹, American democracy is a factor to be taken into account and the US public opinion can change and adopt a less nationalistic and dangerous tone.

⁸ Expressions like these ones are common among the neo-conservative clique which is the inspiring force of most of the foreign policy choices of the Bush Administration. In particular *Financial Times* March 22-March 23, 2003 (G. Dinmore, *Hawks set out bold post-war vision of world*) reported that during a meeting of the American Enterprise Institute in March a conservative think-tank, one of the neo-con, W. Kristol, said that the failure of the first Bush Administration to finish the job in Iraq in 1991 resulted in “a lack of awe for the US” in the Middle East, which encouraged Al-Qaeda. In the same meeting R. Perle said that *the fall of Saddam would be an inspiration for Iranians seeking to be free of their dictatorial mullah*. Another neo-con participating in the meeting, Michael Ledeen, claimed that the conflict is part of a “longer war” and such terrorist sponsors as Iran and Syria knew that. According to Ledeen, France and Germany insisted on “shoring up tyrannical regimes” and this should be remembered by the US. Therefore, when Perle asserted in that meeting that “American are not vindictive”, Ledeen in context of France said that he hoped they were. As for the UN, the opinions were unanimous; Kristol said the UN did not matter much, Perle that “its time has passed”.

⁹ See the detailed analysis on the persistence and enlargement of the great American fortunes contained in K. Philipps, *Wealth and Democracy*, Broadway Books-New York, 2002.

However it must be considered that the neo-con clique at power in Washinton does not act by alone and has, at present, the support of more realistic leaders, very close to the military industry, such as Cheney and Rumsfeld, to say nothing of President Bush himself. Why this second group, has forged an alliance with the neo-cons'? An immediate explanation is given by the events of September 11th. A strong answer was necessary and was considered politically productive for an administration touched by the corporate scandals and the weakness of economy. There is however a deeper reason that can be traced back to the political vacuum left by the end of Cold War and the disappearance of Soviet Union. The US administration seems convinced that this vacuum has to be filled by the only remaining superpower, the only state with the military means to ensure stability to the world.

International relations seem to abhor vacuum. Many of us hoped that the empty space left by the fall of the Berlin's wall could be filled by the UN, with a new texture of relations among the member states. It must be said however that the system of collective security embodied by the UN never worked effectively during the Cold War. After the end of the Cold War many hoped that the UN could act more effectively because the situation was changed and the reciprocal vetoes of US and USSR that paralysed UN were no more expected. The reality was however different because the UN lacked the military structure to work in the new scenarios of civil war and internal violence. The conflict in former Yugoslavia was very instructive under this respect. A new and stronger UN structure is strongly needed, but it remains to be seen if the states, especially the permanent members of the Security Council, would agree on limitations of their present powers.

Besides empires and systems of collective security, history offers a third example of structured international relations. It is the *Balance of Power*, i.e. a dynamical equilibrium among different actors whose actions act to balance themselves reciprocally. It was the sort of equilibrium that arose among the Hellenistic kingdoms after the interregnum following the death of Alexander the Great. A more recent example is given by the European powers, following the Westfalia's peace that closed in 1648 the Thirty Years War. This equilibrium lasted until the Napoleon's quest for a European empire and after his fall still lasted for almost 100 years. It is not synonym of peace, of course, because it is a dynamic equilibrium with changing alliances and shifting positions to ensure that no single power acquires a hegemonic position.

Will future international relations be shaped according the collective security paradigm, with a new major role of UN? Or will an American Empire be established? Or should we interpret the opposition of Russia, France and Germany to the US, before the Iraq war, as the premonitory signal of a future Balance of Power? All these alternatives are possible and since History is not ruled by any iron law, we should act, as individuals as well as collective actors, to push forward our preferred choice.

We cannot exclude the Empire, because strong forces push in this direction. To summarize: First, the overwhelming military strength of the US, matched by its technological, scientific and cultural hegemony; second, the vested interests of the Pentagon and the military industry. One can imagine two versions of the Empire. The first one is more benign. It is motivated by ethic and by the desire to extend Human Rights everywhere. To a Machiavellian or Hobbesian cynic this might appear a hypocritical way to affirm American superiority disguised by ethical motivations. It is not

necessarily so, because also ideas have their own strengths and ethical motivations have been recurrent behind American foreign policy, from W. Wilson down to Bill Clinton. In this version the Empire can have the support of most of the progressive European parties, and some of the European rightist political parties. The second version of the Empire is that of the neo-cons' and the Bush Administration. We discussed it already. It seems imagined with the specific aim to alienate sympathies for America abroad (except perhaps Israel, the only country, besides USA, the neo-cons' take care of). Thus far these undesired results have not changed the Bush policy despite some change of attitude towards the UN. The change seems only cosmetic and it is unlikely that the driving forces pushing towards an aggressive version of the Empire will be arrested by this president. It must be said however that the costs of the Empire are very high and American people can well decide for a different policy, more careful of the big social problems the US has at home. Withdrawal could be therefore a solution spontaneously chosen by the US.

This leads us to the Balance of Power scheme. This is probably what president J. Chirac has in mind when he talks of multipolar world. At the moment this seems unrealistic, for the extreme weakness of all the other actors. But this weakness, at least for Europe and China is only military. From an economic point of view these are emerging powers and especially so for Europe. China is less relevant economically, but has the advantage of political unity, which still is missing to Europe.

Should one desire Balance of Power as an overall scheme for World Security alternative to Empire? Or a system of collective security should be preferred? I have no definite answers. From one side Balance of Power produces only a precarious equilibrium. Historically it was not able to ban wars, and wars, in a nuclear era, are too dangerous to be accepted as a reasonable way to settle controversies. On the other hand, even though a major role of the UN is certainly desirable and the UN system of collective security should be reinforced, it remains to be seen if this institution will be able to reform itself, thus producing a more representative board, including big countries now excluded from the Security Council, and without anachronistic veto powers. Therefore if the bid for an American Empire will fail, Balance of Power could eventually prevail, independently of the actual desires of the international actors and in spite of the risks that accompany it. If this is the outcome, one perhaps in a future day will say that once again Reason used one of Its unpredictable tricks.