

Out of Sight – Out of Mind? Is The Bush Era History Already ?

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Even with the new US government still happy to use symbolic gestures to highlight the changeover in the White House, and the Republicans looking for new leadership figures and policies, it would be premature to consider the Bush era dead and buried already. For even if the legacy of the Bush administration is being pushed to one side, and generally considered to be a liability in the increasingly polarized party-political wrangling in the United States, Bush definitely achieved some successes, which are now threatening to slip all too easily into obscurity. In particular, the principles which governed American foreign policy during his time in office will still be very relevant in the future. The aftershocks from the downright tectonic changes which the policies of his administration caused in the Middle East and Asia have yet to be fully felt, and are certainly well-positioned to rehabilitate a foreign policy venture characterized by its neo-conservatism. Should the situation in Iraq continue to stabilize, further positive changes in the Middle East and Asia can be expected. The George W. Bush administration's Africa policy is a success story which has largely been ignored, but which has increased America's standing in sub-Saharan Africa over the years. And not least of all, George W. Bush's policy in Asia must be considered a success: relationships between China and India are not only better than ever before in the history of the United States, they are also the foundation for the world order of the 21st century. All in all, the verdict on the Bush era could turn out to be more sympathetic in a few years' time than amongst his contemporaries. Yet these achievements could hardly contrast more starkly with the way in which the Bush administration is perceived at present.

It was only the build-up of troops ordered by President Bush in the face of considerable political opposition, as part of the so-called *surge* which was able to turn the tide in Iraq, and help regenerate the project of bringing democracy to this state in the heart of the Middle East.¹ The calming of the situation achieved by the surge has created time for the still young Iraqi democracy to establish itself, and given the country a fresh economic start. As a result, Iraq is freer today than many other of the region's states, in spite of the problems which remain to be solved. Against this background, the American historian Victor Davis was asking what other positive conclusions remained to be drawn from the policies of the Bush administration, as far

¹ Cf. Robin Schroeder, "The Development of the Security Situation in Iraq – Cause for Hope?", in Joachim Krause and Kristina Eichorst (ed.), *Terrorist Yearbook* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2008), p. 59–88.

back as July 2008.² A question which becomes more virulent with every month in which Iraq becomes more stable. This becomes especially clear if we look at the neighboring country of Iran: only eight years ago, Iran was considered to be an extremely free state, compared with others in the region. Iranian citizens enjoyed more freedoms than those of Saudi Arabia or Egypt. Pressure on the Iranian regime to carry out major reforms made it possible for Iran to rise to become a significant player in the region. With the fall of Saddam and the chaos unfolding in Iraq, Iran's rise to become the regional hegemony appeared to pick up even more momentum, with Tehran considered to be the real winner in the Iraq war. The Iranian regime must now look at the stabilization taking place in Iraq with growing concern, however: a Shiite-dominated democracy next door will quickly prompt the question as to whether the Iranian system is superior.

In Asia, the record of the Bush years is patchy; the war in Afghanistan could not be won during his period in office, and the war in Iraq may – for the purposes of the United States – seem to be settled. Whether the democratic experiment will last the distance remains open to debate, despite all positive signs to the contrary. It is also worth remembering that while the war on terror may be entering its eighth year, it is still relatively young, compared with the cold war. Richard Haas rightly pointed out that the strategy of *containment* with which the United States beat the Soviet Union in the Cold War was also in effect a strategy of regime change, and it still took forty years to achieve the historic triumph over communism.³

The improvement in Sino-American relations is significant for two reasons: Firstly, the American government has succeeded in building up its relations with the other Asian states. Relations with Japan are just as robust as those with South Korea, a fact which manifests itself in the involvement of both on the side of the United States in the war on terror. Here, the improvement in relations has been realized in the form of tangible back-up for the security policies of the USA. Put another way: the Bush government succeeded, despite bilateral tensions with Asia, in improving its relations with its Asian partners. Secondly, the Bush government was faced with a difficult challenge to its security policy in Asia in the form of North Korea, an unpredictable nuclear power with an aggressive attitude. The American government quickly opted for a multilateral settlement of the nuclear row with North Korea, establishing the so-called six-party talks as a means of limiting the conflict. This not only had the merit of avoiding a direct confrontation between North Korea on the one hand, and the United States on the other, but also enabled

² Cf. Victor Davis Hanson, "What If Iraq Works?", in: *Real Clear Politics*, 31 July 2008, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/07/what_if_iraq_works.html [25.11.2009].

³ Cf. Richard Haas, "Regime Change and its Limits", in: *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2005), p. 66–78, here p. 68.

the Bush administration to make it clear to the People's Republic of China that their role as regional peacekeeper could be of mutual benefit.

In spite of what their critics say, the Bush government can point to one achievement above all: it made the United States – and with it, the world – a safer place. Even though the outcome of the war in Afghanistan remains open, Al-Qaeda is far less powerful than it was in 2001. Yet the world is not safer, simply because the Bush administration launched the war on terror, and acted to achieve the goal of promoting democracy; it is also safer because the Bush government succeeded in impressive style in bringing China and India onto the world stage as new powers. Recognizing India as a nuclear power and welcoming her into the circle of world powers without harming valuable relationships with China is without doubt the most significant legacy of his time in office, and an impressive achievement of historical import. His administration created a sustainable world order, prepared the ground for "the rise of the rest," in the words of Fareed Zakaria, and a new global security structure which will continue to reflect American and Western values in the future. That these significant achievements have not yet been recognized in Europe is due not least to the fact that George W. Bush's period of office is seen through European eyes here. Firstly, Bush's legacy here rests mainly on the Iraq war, which – particularly in Western Europe – was unanimously opposed. And secondly, American-Asian relations are less important for Europe than they are for the United States themselves.

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