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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ANALYTICAL EXPOSITION OF 9/11'S IMPACT ON US FOREIGN POLICY: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Within hours of the 9/11 terror attacks on New York and Washington D.C., American commentators were already comparing the event to a new 'Pearl Harbor'. The comparison of September 11 with Pearl Harbor was natural because both were surprise attacks that killed many Americans, but most interesting about it was its implication: that an age of innocence and isolation had passed, and that American invulnerability was gone. Just as was the case after the Japanese attack, September 11 seemed fated to change radically and permanently the degree to which, and the way in which, the United States engaged with the rest of the world. Foreign policy arguably changed direction within days of 9/11 with the most immediate and most obvious change being the shift in focus towards terrorism. The focus had been foreign economic policy under Clinton but 9/11 produced a dramatic movement away from diplomacy and towards military solutions via the War on Terror. This change provides evidence of an immediate shift in US interests and this manifested in foreign policy. As such, this is an extremely important change post-9/11, especially as it emerged out of the first response to the attack and served to dictate US actions abroad for more than a decade afterwards. In this analytical article, the author examines the US foreign policy that changed in some very noticeable ways after the terrorist attacks on American soil on Sept. 11, 2001, most noticeably by increasing the amount of intervention in foreign wars, the amount of defense spending, and the redefinition of a new enemy as terrorism. Yet, in other reflective ways, the author also observes, how the foreign policy after 9/11 is viewed by major researchers as phenomenally a continuation of American policy since its beginnings.

INTRODUCTION

The shape of US foreign policy in 2001 is divisible into two easily distinguishable parts: before and after September 11th. But in identifying those two periods as different, we must be very careful to separate substance from appearance, essence from rhetoric. It is not true that "everything changed" after the terror attacks in New York and Washington. The core of US policy domestic and foreign remained unchanged. It was the policy of empire: the management of global dominion, and the consolidation of unchallenged strategic control. Because foreign policy, even for the world's sole super power, requires more than its specific activities around the world. Foreign policy also includes the justifications and frameworks asserted by political elites to give shape and normative coherence of whatever sort to their power trajectory. After 9/11, it was precisely these policy frameworks, the explanations designed to justify policy actions, which changed quite dramatically. The actions themselves remained remarkably consistent before and after, though earlier tendencies towards military aggression and unilateralism increased drastically after 9/11.

By the end of the year the Bush administration's increasingly unilateralist position had been consolidated despite a highly public effort to claim the mantle of international coalitions and partnerships as the seeming linchpin at least during the Afghanistan phase of its "anti-terrorism" war. It was a claim of pride for a few top officials in the generally unilateralist Bush administration and a broad swath of similarly inclined US policymakers, but it was a claim that most of the rest of the world understood to be false. In fact, 100 days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, an international poll was released demonstrating just such a disparity. A sampling of the political, media and business elite on five continents said that they believe the United States is mostly acting unilaterally in the fight against terrorism, the Washington Post reported. By contrast, 70 percent of American opinion-makers in the survey said the United States is acting jointly with its friends and is taking into account the interests of its partners in the war on terrorism". Not for the first time, Washington's power-brokers had fallen victim to their own propaganda.

The US was by no means the only government whose professed foreign policy doctrines and justifications shifted significantly following September 11th. But Washington's shifts had much farther-reaching influence, not only because of its own direct projection of raw military power. When the Bush administration claimed self-defense to justify limitless war abroad and seemingly unconstrained authoritarianism at home, governments across the globe cited smug versions of the same "self-defense" claim to rationalize previously hidden campaigns of repression and human rights violations, especially against Islamist-oriented opposition forces. In return for joining the US coalition, Russia expected and got a free hand in Chechnya, China in its restive Muslim border regions, both Pakistan and India in and around Kashmir, Turkey even more impunity in its Kurdish southeast, Uzbekistan throughout its territory. Perhaps most overtly, Israel's General Ariel Sharon was given a public green light by the Bush administration to further brutalize the population of occupied Palestine. Around the world, a new cry arose from spin-doctors working to explain their coalition-allied governments' inexcusable human rights violations and repression to the world community: "There is no basis for criticism - we're just exercising the same right to self-defense that the US is doing in Afghanistan."¹ Prior to the events of September 11th, most Americans paid little attention to global events, not even to the actions and policies of their own government around the world. Beyond the broadest, most general concerns, few international developments reached the top of the public agenda. Certainly many Americans recognize that global warming and the AIDS epidemic represent serious threats to their own well-being. But that rarely leads to recognition of the disproportionate US responsibility for causing global warming, or of how US neglect and criminally low levels of foreign aid make solutions to the AIDS crisis in Africa or elsewhere vastly more difficult. But in 2001 illusions remained. One was that US actions in countries around the world could best be nobly described as "nation-building" or "democratization", and that US foreign aid was generous and designed to lift up the poorest of the poor. Few Americans considered that US policies abroad might be viewed as anything other than friendly and benign by the people who lived outside the US and who were the targets of those policies.

A few months after September 11th the influential analyst Fareed Zakaria² described how "the United States has sought to use its great wealth and influence to insulate itself from the troubles of the globe. In the months prior to Sept. 11, the Bush administration went several steps farther. All its initiatives and statements - national missile defense, the withdrawal from six treaties in as many months, the criticism of nation-building-were efforts to disentangle itself from the rest of the world. But the world comes back to bite you". It was indeed the troubles of the globe and their after-bite from which US elites sought to insulate themselves. But Zakaria left out the other half of the story of US global engagement. Gaining and maintaining control over the world's resources, its lands and spaces, the world's labor and the world's accomplishments, all remained central to the US national agenda. Throughout 2001 -before AND after September 11th the foreign policy of the US remained the policy of a strategically unchallenged dominion, at the apogee of its power and influence, rewriting the global rules for how to manage its empire.

The Impact of 9/11 as Perceived on US Policy: On September 20th, 2001, President George W. Bush (2001, n.

pag.)³ gave a speech addressing the events of nine days before: "On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars, but for the past 136 years they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941." The speech drew upon the notion that America had been attacked and also laid the blame firmly at the door of terrorism whilst interpreting it as an act of war. Although the emotive rhetoric was designed to stir support for a response, it also heralded a new era in US foreign policy. Defined as a "foreign policy crisis" by Bolton (2008, p. 6), it was inevitable that it would elicit a response by American policymakers but the extent to which it has changed US foreign policy has been hotly debated. As such, this essay will discuss the changes in post-9/11 US foreign policy, identifying areas that marked a departure from the policy in place prior to 9/11. It will analyze each to determine the extent to which it was a direct response to the terrorist attack and evaluate how the change impacted upon long-term foreign policy strategy.

This will be done with a view to concluding that many of the changes to US foreign policy in the post-9/11 era have been a response to the evolving security threat posed by terrorism and did force policy to evolve in order to accommodate strategies that address modern problems. However, those changes may have made an immediate impact but did little to alter the long-term course of US foreign policy. Foreign policy arguably changed direction within days of 9/11 with the most immediate and most obvious change being the shift in focus towards terrorism. Bentley and Holland (2013)⁴ highlight that the focus had been foreign economic policy under Clinton but 9/11 produced a dramatic movement away from diplomacy and towards military solutions via the War on Terror. There was also movement away from policy that prioritized relations with the great powers of Russia and China. Earlier unilateralism had negatively impacted upon relations with both nations, thus causing deterioration that extended beyond the Cold War era hostilities and prevented effective relations between East and West (Cameron, 2006)⁵. However, the American desire to create a "world-wide anti-terrorism alliance" (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 60)⁶ brought about a relative thaw between the nations and facilitated discourse in order to cater for shared security concerns. This change provides evidence of an immediate shift in US interests and this manifested in foreign policy. As such, this is an extremely important change that occurred post-9/11, especially as it emerged out of the first response to the attack and served to dictate US actions abroad for more than a decade afterwards.

The shift of focus from the great powers and towards terrorism provided policy space to address security threats via the three pillars of the Bush administration's national security policy, which had become a fundamental element of foreign policy as, for the first time since World War II, the attack on American soil brought both ostensibly dichotomous strands of policy together. The pillars were missile defence (a continuation of policy prior to 9/11), pre-emption and homeland security, both of which were embraced after 9/11 in response to it (Lebovic, 2007)⁷. Although elements of this were rooted in domestic policy, the pre-emption aspect of policy was also manifest in foreign policy because non-state terrorist groups and rogue states became inextricably linked to US foreign policy as targets to be dealt with under the new priorities outlined in the wake of the terror attacks, although this was somewhat more gradual than the initial shift to focus on terrorism.

Indeed, the Bush Doctrine marked a fundamental shift towards utilisation of policy that incorporates both pre-emptive action and preventative action, which marked the decline of the reliance on containment and deterrence that dictated policy from the Cold War era onwards (Jentleson, 2013; Levy, 2013)⁸. The pre-emptive strikes were indicative of a strategy that sought to defend by attacking those who posed an immediate security threat to the US and allowed policy to justify the unilateral military pursuit of specifically American interests. This suggests that 9/11 was used as an effective excuse to create foreign policy that better mirrored the ideology of the government than what was in place in the months prior to the attack. There is extensive criticism of the policy that reinforces the assumption that the government manipulates foreign policy to suit its own ends. For example, Ryan (2008, p. 49)⁹ argues that Iraq, which was labeled a rogue state, was already a focal point of foreign policy but the events of 9/11 allowed policymakers to push their specific agenda: "Influential strategists within the Bush administration seized on the horror to gain assent from liberal Americans to move the country towards a war in Iraq that neoconservative strategists desired, but that many within the US shunned." Holland (2012)¹⁰ concurs, arguing that coercive rhetoric was used extensively in order to sell the War on Terror via culturally embedded discourse. In addition, Miles (2013, p. 110)¹¹ advocates that "Bush's placement of rogue states at the centre of America's response to 9/11 was welcomed as an opportunity to overthrow a number of old threats and terror loving tyrannies who stood in the way of democracy and freedom."

This perspective certainly offers a credible insight as to how 9/11 was manipulated in order to push foreign policy in a certain direction, and indeed one that was a continuation of what had gone before. However, the need to manipulate public opinion is indicative of the fact that foreign policy had deviated from that in place directly prior to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre. US foreign policy has also responded to the increased demand for humanitarian assistance to aid failed states and nation building to ensure their reconstruction following 9/11. Shannon (2009)¹² points out that the reconstruction of Afghanistan following the US invasion there has essentially helped to prevent the failure of the state improve the quality of life for its people, introduce freedoms and democratic processes that were absent before and aided the avoidance of the state being controlled by terrorists. This was certainly a change from previous foreign policy: "Before 9/11, nation building was often caricatured as a form of idealistic altruism divorced from hard-headed foreign policy realism... In the post-9/11 era, nation-building has a hard-headed strategic rationale: to prevent weak or failing states from falling prey to terrorist groups" (Litwak, 2007, p. 313)¹³. This summary of the extent to which attitudes changed highlights the fact that a greater role in states that required humanitarian assistance was incorporated into foreign policy out of necessity rather than ideological choice. There was a distinct need to limit terrorist activity as far as possible and this actively manifested in this element of foreign policy. As Litwak (2007)¹⁴ points out, humanitarian action was not a staple element of American foreign policy by any means and so this, more than any other element of foreign policy, does signal that a change occurred within the strategic objectives inherent in the War on Terror. However, there are criticisms of this particular change because the US is charged with failing to follow through with humanitarian aid to the extent that it

should have done. For example, Johnstone and Laville (2010)¹⁵ suggest that the reconstruction of Afghanistan was effectively abandoned with a failure to create institutions that would withstand future threats to freedom and democracy. This suggests that this particular area of strategy was not well thought out and did not achieve its ultimate aims. However, the fact that it was included in US foreign policy post-9/11 suggests that there was a concerted effort to implement a multifaceted policy to tackle terrorism as a new and dangerous global strategic threat. However, despite the fact that the analysis here points to a change of direction for US foreign policy in the wake of 9/11 that was specifically designed to tackle the causes of and security threat posed by terrorism, some critical areas of policy did not change. For example, the long term objectives of the US were still manifest within new policy but they appeared in a different form that essentially provided a response to a different threat. Leffler (2011, n.pag.)¹⁶ argues that 9/11 did not change the world or transform the long-term trajectory of US grand strategy. The United States' quest for primacy, its desire to lead the world, its preference for an open door and free markets, its concern with military supremacy, its readiness to act unilaterally when deemed necessary, its eclectic merger of interests and values, its sense of indispensability – all these remained, and remain, unchanged.

This summary of the ultimate goals of US foreign policy draws attention to the fact that very little has changed. Although the British government supported the invasion of Iraq in the wake of 9/11, the fact that the United Nations Security Council refused to pass a resolution condoning the use of force did not prevent the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom (Hybel, 2014)¹⁷. This is evidence of the readiness to act unilaterally if it serves their interests. Gaddis concurs, noting that US self-interest remained the same with very little consideration of long term strategy that intervention elsewhere would require. Bolton (2008, p. 6)¹⁸, on the other hand, agrees that many of the changes to US foreign policy were made immediately but he disagrees with the assertions of Gaddis¹⁹ concerning their long term impact. Bolton (2008, pp. 6-7)²⁰ asserts that the changes have caused a longer-term impact, albeit one that has diminished over time as a result of the enduring nature of the national security policy and its evolution to accommodate the threat of terrorism in the wake of 9/11. Although this provides a dissenting voice in one respect, it demonstrates consensus on the fact that the changes in US foreign policy post-9/11 were a direct response to a new global threat but they were implemented alongside existing strategic goals. In effect, the approach may have changed but the ultimate objective had not.

The Post 9/11 Shift in US Perspectives to Foreign Policy: There can be little doubt that there was a distinct shift in focus to the need to deal with terrorism after the first attack on American soil for seventy years. Similarly, the policy content evolved to adopt a more humanitarian approach to global crises and a proactive and pre-emptive approach to potential threats. All of these changes did mark a departure from what had gone before in some way. However, although the majority of changes was incorporated into foreign policy within two years and was all undoubtedly a response to the attack and its causes, there is significant evidence to suggest that such actions provided an extension of foreign policy doctrine that had gone before. For example, although the focus of foreign policy shifted from the old Cold War objectives of containment and deterrence to terrorism, the interest

policymakers took in some rogue states like Iraq was simply a continuation of established ideologies of ensuring freedom and democracy. Similarly, the US administration of foreign policy changed very little in terms of its determination to act unilaterally where necessary and lead the world in a battle against the latest threat to global security. As such, it is possible to conclude that many of the changes to US foreign policy in the post-9/11 era have been a response to the evolving security threat posed by terrorism. Furthermore, it was necessary for policy to evolve in order to accommodate strategies that address modern problems that were not as much of a priority in the late 20th century. However, whilst those changes made an immediate impact on foreign policy, it did not alter the long-term course of US foreign policy because that remained firmly focused on the outcomes of action elsewhere in the world in relation to American interests.

In the wake of 9/11, then, the United States and many of its allies, foremost among them the United Kingdom, re-orientated their foreign and defence policies. This was an effort to counter the threats they felt they faced from such states and from non-state actors who could use weapons of mass destruction and other non-conventional means to attack them. This strategy was evidenced, in different forms, in the intervention in Afghanistan from October 2001 and in the war in Iraq from March 2003. Modern terrorism can be witnessed at work before and after 9/11 in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Israel and Indonesia. Increasingly, this threat reflects the modern phenomenon of 'asymmetrical warfare' as is waged by non state and state-sponsored actors.

As we see, such trans-border terrorist violence constitutes a direct challenge to the authority of all states. But it particularly challenges the right of a 'great power' such as the United States, currently the dominant world power, to regulate the international use of violence. Now, perhaps more than ever before, every country is or can be affected by what goes on inside other states, particularly those we define as 'failing' or 'rogue' states, which may possess weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and can be seen to pose a threat to their neighbours, their region and, quite possibly, the wider world. The United States foreign policy changed in some very noticeable ways after the terrorist attacks on American soil on Sept. 11, 2001, most noticeably by increasing the amount of intervention in foreign wars, the amount of defense spending, and the redefinition of a new enemy as terrorism. Yet, in other reflective ways, foreign policy after 9/11 is viewed phenomenally by critics as a continuation of American policy since its beginnings.

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