

US FOREIGN POLICY UNDER BUSH: BALANCE SHEET AND OUTLOOK

The power of the US to shape international relations has been significantly diminished under President Bush. Efforts to establish a new order in the Middle East have failed. In Asia and the post-Soviet space, too, Washington's influence has been weakened. The partial renunciation of the neoconservative project during Bush's second term in office was not enough to amend the country's loss of reputation. Among the challenges facing the next US president will be reforming the global governance framework, strengthening the transatlantic partnership, and pursuing a selective strategic partnership with China and Russia.



President Bush announces the end of combat operations in Iraq, 1 May 2003. Reuters / Larry Downing

George W. Bush is likely to go down in history with one of the worst foreign-policy records of all US presidents. When he came into office, the position of the US as the leading global power was undisputed. America's soft power was robust and its military dominance greater than ever. The dynamics of globalization were to a large degree shaped by the US economy. Eight years later, the US claim to political and moral leadership has suffered lasting damage. The US armed forces are overstretched, and their presence in complex crisis areas will be required for many years to come. The US economy is in the throes of an unprecedented crisis in the financial markets.

The legacy for Bush's successor will be a difficult one: On the one hand, the limitations of the US as the single leading global power are becoming increasingly

obvious. On the other hand, the global policy challenges have become accentuated in almost all important fields of international relations. Bush's successor will have to develop new strategies for resolving foreign policy matters and will have to find new forms of cooperation with a wide range of actors on the international stage. His ability to do so will be of crucial importance to the world at large, since the core international challenges cannot be managed sustainably without the constructive engagement of the US.

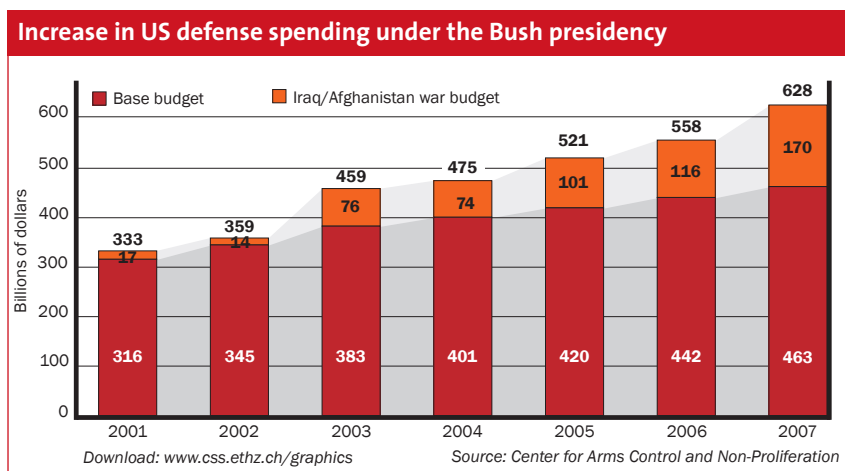
"9/11" and the Bush revolution

When Bush moved into the White House in January 2001, he had no visible foreign policy experience. During the election campaign, his foreign policy team had distanced itself from the humanitarian interventionism of Bill Clinton and had warned against overstressing US military resour-

ces in the context of extensive stabilization missions. This pragmatic realism was also dominant in the first foreign policy statements of the new administration. Against this background, it seems ironic that US foreign policy in Bush's first term was strongly marked by idealist and interventionist elements.

The rapid change in the foreign-policy course during Bush's first year in office was closely linked to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. In retrospect, the "9/11" attacks marked the defining moment in the so-called "Bush revolution" in foreign policy. The rise of the neoconservative forces to become the dominant faction among Bush's foreign-policy advisors was favored by two factors: First of all, "9/11" evoked a fundamental feeling of vulnerability in US society that contradicted the national self-perception as a safe haven beyond the reach of permanent power conflicts. Secondly, a dramatic realignment of US foreign policy seemed not just necessary, but also possible. The belief in the US ability to eradicate evil unilaterally was based on a feeling of unprecedented power.

The Bush administration's revolutionary foreign policy was aimed at expanding the "unipolar moment" (Charles Krauthammer) as far as possible in the interests of US security and a stable global order. Driven by the specter of global terrorism armed with mass casualty weapons, the so-called "war on terrorism" was identified as the core



mission of US foreign policy. According to the National Security Strategy of 2002, deterrence and containment were no longer sufficient to safeguard America’s security in the face of terrorist threats with global reach and so-called “rogue states” such as Iraq and North Korea. Instead, what was required was an offensive approach that included preventive military operations. At the same time, the full range of US power was to be deployed to facilitate the spread of democracy and guarantee global stability. The focus was on democratizing the broader Middle East as the foundation for a comprehensive regional restructuring.

Iraq and the failure of the neoconservative project

Another aspect of the change of course in foreign policy was that relations with US allies were no longer to be shaped by protracted attempts at persuasion, but by practical successes. Nevertheless, against the background of the rapid military victory over the Taliban regime and al-Qaida’s paramilitary base in Afghanistan, the US campaign against terrorism initially enjoyed widespread international support. However, the subsequent dramatic international showdown over the intervention in Iraq in 2002/03 deprived the new US security strategy of the support even of its traditional allies. The policy of military regime change in Iraq lacked legitimacy because, due to confusion over the state of Saddam Hussein’s WMD program, there was no undisputable perception of imminent threat and because there was no solid evidence of any close relationship between Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaida network and the Iraqi regime.

The neoconservative project failed because, on the one hand, it overestimated the threat of global terrorism and re-framed the “war on terror” as represen-

ting a struggle for the survival of the American way of life. On the other hand, it underestimated the difficulties for external actors of achieving a democratic transformation of the Arab world. In retrospect, the Iraq war symbolizes the relative decline of the US as the single global power. After the remarkably rapid overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the US was unable to refute the charge of having consciously exaggerated the threat. At the same time, stabilization of Iraq was a long time in coming. The country sank into chaos resembling civil war, was divided along religious and ethnic lines, and became a new hotbed of recruitment and operations for al-Qaida. The overthrow of Hussein and of the Taliban also resulted in a net gain of influence for Iran and for Shi’ite movements such as Hizbollah, weakening not only the US as the leading regional power, but also the Sunni rulers and Arab nationalism.

The interim balance sheet of US foreign policy at the end of Bush’s first term in office was sobering: Against the backdrop of images from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, the international acceptance of the US as a political and moral power reached a nadir. The US military had been overstretched to a point where the US armed forces were substantially at risk. The strong increase of military spending and the high cost of war, as well as tax cuts, had turned a US\$200 billion budget surplus into a US\$400 billion budget deficit. The declining domestic approval rates also caused a lowering of expectations concerning Bush’s freedom of action in his second term.

Forced corrections

The failure of the neoconservative agenda did force Bush to implement a series of corrections in his foreign-policy course. The departure of key neoconservative

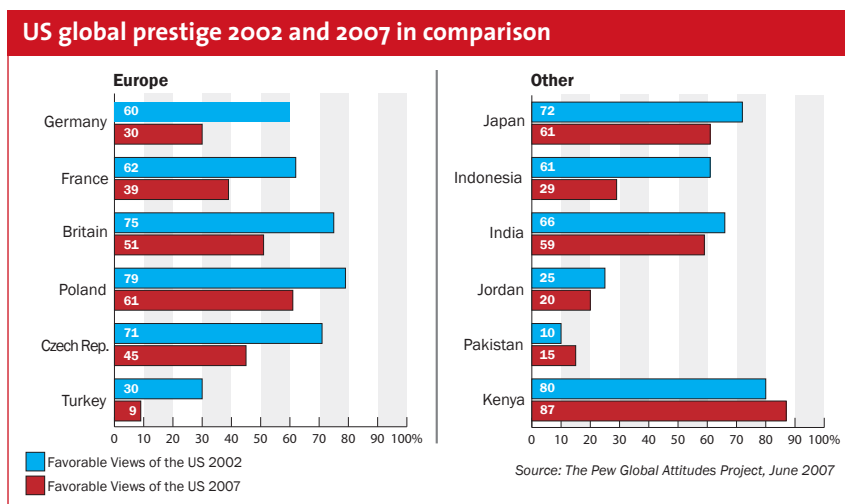
players (Wolfowitz, Feith, Bolton, Rumsfeld) and the return of the pragmatists (Zoellick, Burns, Gates) coincided with a shift in the style of conducting foreign policy. This shift included a newfound appreciation of diplomacy, alliance-building, deterrence, and containment in US foreign policy. The 2005 travels of Bush and his new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Europe, with symbolic visits to NATO and the EU in Brussels, inaugurated a period of recuperation in the severely tattered transatlantic relationship. While the foreign-policy realignment – expedited by the elections of Angela Merkel in Germany (2005) and Nicolas Sarkozy in France (2007) – resulted in an improvement of atmosphere between Washington and the European capitals, Bush was unable to cement the cracks in the foundations of NATO.

As far as overcoming the global political and economic challenges was concerned, the overall foreign-policy record of President Bush’s second term remained dismal. A substantial improvement of the global standing of the US proved unattainable under Bush. On the contrary: The limits of US power became increasingly apparent. In geopolitical terms, this is as true for the Middle East as it is for Asia and the post-Soviet space. But even in the field of economics, US power has been diminished.

Difficult Middle East legacy

In the Middle East, the US, occasionally together with the Europeans and moderates in the region, has been able to make selective progress towards stabilization. Overall, the situation remains extremely fragile, however. In Iraq, security has markedly increased due to such factors as the US troop surge, which Bush pushed through almost single-handedly, and closer cooperation with local tribal leaders. Nevertheless, the political compromises necessary for Iraq’s long-term stabilization have remained at a rudimentary stage so far.

Bush’s late attempts to restart the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians also mark a move in the right direction. However, here, too, the strategy of isolating Hamas in Gaza and the US government’s lack of willingness to apply pressure to Israel should put a damper on expectations of rapid progress. The same applies to the conflict over Iran’s use of nuclear technology. In this case, the prerequisites for de-escalation have improved in recent months, not least due to better coordination between the US



position and the EU-3/P5+1 and the Sunni rulers as well as a broader use of positive incentives within the US negotiation strategy. Nevertheless, the US is still hesitant to engage in a policy of dialog with Iran, which makes sustainable conflict resolution difficult. Overall, the transformation of US Middle East policy has been too little too late, which is why these issues will also dominate the security agenda of the new administration.

Loss of power in Asia and the Caucasus

In Asia, too, the relative decline of US power has become manifest. In Northeast Asia, China has been able to enhance its influence. In this context, the Bush administration has been forced to turn away from its policy of unilateral pressure on North Korea. The improved cooperation between Beijing and Washington resulted in an action plan that committed North Korea to nuclear disarmament. However, Pyongyang’s delaying tactics have raised doubts as to whether the danger of nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia has really been averted.

In Southwest Asia, the situation has markedly deteriorated in recent years. This is due not least to the fact that the US, after overthrowing the Taliban regime, had shifted its focus to Iraq and had neglected nation-building in Afghanistan. The resurgence of the Taliban and of al-Qaida forced Washington to increase its troop deployments and tested the limits of alliance solidarity within NATO to the breaking point. The expanded influence of militant Islam in Pakistan and the forced resignation of General Pervez Musharraf further complicated the US position. In the course of US ground operations on Pakistani territory, anti-Americanism has been increa-

sing again among the Pakistani population. A stabilization of the Southwest Asian crisis zone will be difficult to achieve without enhancing the regionalization of conflict resolution efforts.

In the Caucasus, Russia – resurgent due to high energy prices – has increasingly been acting as an alternative to the weakened power of the US. American efforts to tie the former Soviet states closer to the Euro-Atlantic security institutions and to improve the West’s access to the energy reserves of the Caspian region have suffered severe setbacks. With its unilateral military and diplomatic action in the Georgia crisis of August 2008, Russia underscored its role as a regional hegemon in the Caucasus. At the same time, European diplomatic efforts made clear that the EU as Russia’s most important trade and energy partner is increasingly better placed than Washington to exert a certain degree of pressure on Russia as far as the organization of the post-Soviet space is concerned. The relative loss of US influence in European security matters had already become visible on the occasion of the NATO summit in Bucharest, when Germany and France opposed the extension of the Membership Action Plan for NATO to include Georgia and Ukraine. At the same time, the missile defense program promoted by Bush could become a new bone of contention within the alliance in Europe.

In economic and financial affairs, too, the Bush administration was forced to change course radically towards the end of its second term. The crisis in the US financial markets highlighted the failure of the state’s (de-)regulation policy and has compelled the government to bail out the unbridled financial industry with a package of several hundred billion US dollars.

For some time earlier, the relative weakness of the dollar and the rise of the euro had been indicators of shifts in the global markets. Another byproduct of globalization has been the accumulation of capital in undemocratic countries such as China and Russia, enhancing their influence in international politics.

Outlook

The core dilemma of the US as a global superpower reflects the realities of a complex and interdependent world in which many highly diverse actors at various levels are pursuing divergent interests: The ability of the US to deal with the vital global challenges by itself is declining. But even if Washington’s influence and reputation has declined decisively during the Bush presidency, the US remains indispensable for facilitating sustainable solutions to most global problems.

Accordingly, the expectations concerning the incoming US president are high: The globalization of markets and the accumulation of capital in Asia demands, first of all, an adaptation of the governance structures for the global trade, currency, economic, energy, and ecological systems, which are still strongly shaped by Western perceptions. Secondly, the resolution of regional crises in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Asia, and Africa as well as the effective handling of global risks such as proliferation, terrorism, or climate change will only be possible if Washington makes a greater effort to develop multilateral strategies with a strengthened Europe and other partners. Third, the global economic and political governance challenges demand that the US engage in selective strategic cooperation with China and Russia. In a non-polar world, the virtue of successfully combining power and cooperation will be in higher demand than ever before.

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