



Democratic Divergence: A Challenge to U.S. Primacy?

by Donald K. Emmerson

Since the Cold War ended more than a decade ago, analysts have wondered: Who will counterbalance the global primacy of the United States?

Shouts of "Allahu Akbar!" aboard crashing planes on Sept. 11, 2001 announced one answer: violently anti-U.S. Muslims. As if to corroborate that conclusion, jihadists went on to commit atrocities in Karachi, Djerba, Bali, Mombasa, and elsewhere, with no end in sight.

But Islamist rage will not counterbalance U.S. power. Al-Qaeda is too weak. The U.S. is too strong. Sympathy for religious coercion and carnage, even in the Muslim world, is too scarce. (Reinforcing this last condition were the non-U.S. nationalities of nearly all of terrorism's victims in 2002.)

At a meeting I attended in mid-October 2001, experts on biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons unanimously assigned "a 100 percent probability" to an imminent major second terrorist attack on U.S. soil. They were mistaken. Virtually unnoticed at the time by media and officials in full crisis mode, the biggest event of 2002 inside the U.S. was a nonevent. The second shoe did not fall.

In hindsight, observers overrated the prowess of al-Qaeda and underestimated how effective the countermeasures against it would be. That was no comfort to the burned survivors of jihadist savagery in Kuta (Bali) in mid-October 2002, or to those on the receiving end of Islamist wrath in earlier incidents outside the U.S. But periodic and scattered outrages perpetrated in Allah's name do not augur the dislodging of U.S. primacy. Far from precipitating a coalition against the United States, al-Qaeda's crusade emboldened regimes around the world, often with U.S. help, to repress their domestic enemies, homicidal zealots included.

Compared with Osama bin Laden, other candidates to overthrow U.S. preeminence are not much more convincing. The "axis of evil" may be evil, but it is not an axis. Iran is in the slow throes of reform. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein is desperately trying to survive. Kim Jong-il is more dangerous. But a decision in Pyongyang to rain missiles on South Korea or Japan is likely to assure not the end of U.S. influence but the end of North Korea. Nor is there reason to think that an epitaph to U.S. power is now being written in either Russian or Chinese.

Noteworthy among the remaining possibilities is the thought that the United States could wind up defeating itself. This scenario operates by one or both of two logics:

exhaustion and provocation. Gradual exhaustion - the cumulative risk of doing too much - was historian Paul Kennedy's concern when in 1987 he cautioned against "imperial overstretch." Fatal provocation - the contingent danger of angering too many - has preoccupied Asianist Chalmers Johnson since 2000, when he warned of deadly "blowback" against American bullying.

Kennedy's concern could become less unrealistic if - some say merely when - U.S. President George W. Bush tries to "take out" the regime in Baghdad, and if he and his administration then find themselves in a prolonged and costly quagmire. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has assured Americans of their country's ability to fight on two fronts at once. Yet a simultaneous war on the Korean Peninsula that forces the extension of American arms to opposite sides of the globe could intensify pains of overstretch. As for blowback, many expect a U.S.-instigated war in Iraq to reap pandemic fury in the Muslim world, while a U.S. assault on North Korean nuclear facilities could help revive the candidacy of China to become America's next counter-hegemon.

But these ifs are too many and too shaky to justify turning such apocalyptic inferences from legitimate concerns into realistic fears. Iraq is not Vietnam, and the Bush administration is allergic to the two-war prospect that its defense secretary claims it can sustain. Americans should expect Muslim anger against Bush II for finishing in Iraq the job that, in the Gulf War, Bush I began. But the aura of inevitability that has come to surround this Second Gulf War has already resigned many Muslims to its occurrence. Depending on how plausibly a U.S. attack can be rationalized as the will of the UN, Muslim fury could surprise observers by being less catastrophic than expected. Also crucial in limiting criticism will be the speed of success, as it was in Afghanistan. Unlikely but not impossible is an internal revolt that removes the reason for war.

Who will, then, counterbalance U.S. power? Conceivably, no one will. But the sheer dynamic uncertainty of global affairs must surely, eventually, bring to a conclusion even this protracted "unipolar moment."

There is one more speculation worth noting, if only because it has been almost wholly ignored. Namely:

The consequences of democratization will pose the chief and most enduring challenge to U.S. primacy.

Never have there been more electoral democracies in the world - 121 today, by Freedom House's latest count, up from 66 in 1987. So far, this trend has been cause mainly for American celebration. Viewed from the United States,

democratization has been easy to construe as imitation - the sincerest form of flattery. American politicians routinely project U.S. democratic values as not just humane but human: what, deep in their hearts, everyone thinks and wants or, at any rate, would if they knew what was best.

Whatever the accuracy of this presumption, it is at least less fantastic than the idea that installing the right to vote in a formerly authoritarian state will necessarily instill, among the newly enfranchised, sympathy for U.S. foreign policy - what Washington does as opposed to what Americans may believe. gis' extensive air defense capability, and joint operability.

It is no coincidence that recently elected governments in Turkey and South Korea are not cheerleaders for confronting Iraq and North Korea, respectively. Living adjacent to the "evil axis" makes Turks and South Koreans uniquely vulnerable to the consequences of belligerence. Their electoral democracies assure that public fears based on this vulnerability cannot be ignored. As a senior adviser to Turkey's new prime minister recently observed, "Everybody knows that 80 to 85 percent of the Turkish people would say no to war in Iraq. As a democratic country, how can we say yes?" Gerhard Schröder's decision to comply with such logic in Germany's latest election is a main reason he remains chancellor of that country. And these countries are U.S. allies.

Nor is the prospect of democratic divergence limited to these admittedly special cases. In foreign democracies generally, other things being equal, it is implausible that candidates and voters should consistently favor U.S. positions. Most Muslims, for example, are moderate. But in countries with large Muslim majorities and without strong secular traditions, it is not hard to envision an election whose results reduce the distance between state and religion, regardless of what the U.S. constitution's first amendment recommends. Nor is the chance of such outcomes limited to balloting among Muslims, witness the recent electoral success of hardline Hindus in the Indian state of Gujarat.

Democratization need not be inimical to U.S. foreign policies. But democratic divergence in a more and more democratic world can be expected to limit the ability of U.S. administrations to act unilaterally in ways that significantly threaten or burden other countries. What is an election, after all, if not a multilateral consultation, among voters rather than states?

Qualifications are needed: Democracies may diverge not only from the U.S. but also from each other. European disunity over Iraq is an illustration. An irony of unilateralist American rhetoric is that it can help stimulate a multilateral façade - a coalition of the somewhat willing - by motivating foot-dragging governments to move closer to Washington lest they lose all leverage and favor in the event of superpower success. Under mounting American pressure to become a launching pad for war against Baghdad, Ankara's "no" already has modulated to "yes" with reservations. And then there is British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has been willing to ignore his own constituency's reluctance to say "yes" to

President Bush - convergence at the top despite divergence from below.

The implications of democratic divergence for U.S. power, therefore, are not its overthrow but its complication - and, prospectively, its erosion.

In his State of the Union message to Congress on Jan. 28, 2003, President Bush emphasized U.S. power. "The course of this nation," he said, "does not depend on the decisions of others." An especially loud ovation followed. But one can wonder how much of the applause represented conviction as opposed to hope.

U.S. history has not been impervious to the decisions of others. As for the future, events will rescue or refute the president's claim. In the meantime, it would be helpful to think clearly not only about threats from tyrants and terrorists, but also about how democracy could affect supremacy.

Two illustrations: On Jan. 16 in *The New York Times*, commenting on Turkish reluctance to back a U.S. war in Iraq, columnist William Safire wrote: "Paradoxically, the growth of democracy in Turkey - which America cheers - has introduced an element of uncertainty" into the Turkish-American alliance. Paradoxically? Not by the logic of democratic divergence. In an adjacent op-ed, former National Security Adviser Richard Allen bemoaned South Korean divergence from a U.S. policy of confronting North Korea as "a serious breach of faith." Breach of faith? Not if one's faith is in democracy, including the right to disagree. In a democratizing world, even a superpower may discover that the compliance of allies is no longer an element of certainty or a matter of faith, but a condition to be earned.

On Jan. 3, President Bush said of Saddam Hussein that "he really doesn't care about the opinion of mankind." Three days later Bush urged his nemesis to "listen to what the world is saying." Whatever the outcome of this administration's plan to finish the business of the earlier Gulf War by finishing off Hussein's regime, should U.S. assertiveness persist and democratic divergence become more common, future custodians of U.S. predominance may increasingly find themselves on the receiving end of such remarks.

Donald K. Emmerson is Senior Fellow, Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. Another version of this argument appears in the YaleGlobal Online Magazine at www.yaleglobal.yale.edu/index.jsp.