

The endless war: challenge and opportunities

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When George W. Bush declared the endless war back in September 2001, the world was taken aback. However, retroactively, it becomes apparent that it did not start on that fatidic date. For years prior, the United States had embarked on a major program of military reorganization, captured in the famous 1994 Pentagon review produced under the Clinton administration. Even before that in the 1980s when it became clear that the Soviet Union was self destroying, the idea came about that the US was entering into a new phase, able to occupy the center stage and establishing itself as the one and only superpower in the world. Under Reagan, a group of people that became to be known as the neoconservatives made a proposal so that the next century could and should be an 'American century'.

From Bagdad to Sarajevo

The first salvo in that new conjunction was shot by Bush 'père' with the 1990 war against Iraq. Historians will tell us in the future how the US manipulated Saddam so that he fell into the trap. The goal was obviously to consolidate US positions in the Middle East with the tacit support of a post Soviet fragmented and chaotic Russia and the full endorsement of local reactionary allies like Saudi Arabia. It was completed relatively successfully. The second 'occasion' was with the Bosnian war in the wake of the programmed destruction of Yugoslavia. Again Russians and Europeans were divided, chaotic and at best incompetent. Clinton who had then succeeded Bush saw a very good opportunity to build a US military web right in the center of Europe on the southern flank of Russia and adjacent to the Middle East. During Clinton's second mandate, military expenses went considerably up again with deployments and incursions in several regions of the world, particularly in Asia and Africa. While Clinton was ambivalent about the neoconservatives, he was nevertheless part and parcel of the 'grand strategy' of the 'New American Century'. Apart from the religious/ideological underlines of that view, there is a rational argument whereas the decline of the US is on the horizon, unless the US plays hard ball and capitalized on its 'comparative advantage' that for several reasons are basically military, and not economically, considering the rise of European and Asian competitors.

A bifurcation through Kabul

Bush said it clearly on September 12, 2001, 'this tragedy is an opportunity'. With the huge military (re)build-up of the last decade, the new war in Afghanistan was more than welcomed. There were tactical disagreements however. Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld were arguing for a superficial take-over of Afghanistan while preparing the 'real' war in Iraq (and even Iran), contrary to the generals in the Pentagon and Colin Powell who were afraid of overstressing US forces and who would have concentrated first in Afghanistan. That debate was settled to the benefit of the neoconservative and then it went on. Again the deployment in Iraq cannot be understood without the global context. Weak and divided Russia and EU, fearful China concerned with its globalization processes, fragmented global south unable of any initiatives, etc. And in the 'home front' in the West massive but indecisive opposition related to, partially, the hesitations and fears of European social democracy. It was again 'logical' for Bush and Cheney to think that it was winnable. Well we know now that it was not. After all, the generals and Colin Powell were right.

The recent deadlock

From 2006 when it became clear that the occupation was not defeating the insurgency in Iraq (that defeat was also later acknowledged in Afghanistan), the lines of fractures within the US ruling class reopened. Bush and Cheney at some point tried, almost successfully, to push the chaos ahead by attacking Iran, even contemplating the idea of using nuclear weapons. They were taken aback not only the resistance in Iraq, but also by the defeat of their Israeli surrogate and accomplice in Lebanon (August 2006). In the meantime, European, Russian and even Chinese officials were starting to react, opposing, for example, to release more troops in Afghanistan to help, by default, US offensives in Iraq, and also opposing an attack against Iran. Different maneuvers from Washington to (re)export the conflict to other parts of the world (Philippines, Pakistan, even Columbia) did not do well. Cheney's threats against Russia ended up in another US debacle in Georgia. All of that led to a massive rejection of the Bush-Cheney strategy within the US and later to the build-up and ultimate victory of Obama.

Where to go now?

Bush's gamble, highly risky, failed and now the US are in a dangerous spin. Obviously, different crisis are combined and interrelated. The mismanagement of the economy was not an 'accident', but part and parcel of the grandiose scheme to consolidate US hegemony through military means in the context of rising competition. In the meantime, US drives in the world have to be revisited. The first thing to avoid is to confuse means and goals. Although Obama for sure will contest the means, it is not evident at all that he will try to modify the goals. Most of his pronouncements about war and conflicts were about continuity rather than rupture. The 'Clintonisation' of his administration would go in the same direction. The fact is that the US ruling class cannot afford 'loosing the Middle East and Central Asia'. It is of course about resources, but not in the simplistic way that most people think about it. The US does NOT need the oil and gas of that region: what they need is to control the flows and intercept the linkages between the west (EU and Russia) and the east (China, India and Asia pacific countries). They need to be right there in the middle, physically and symbolically, as the only power that counts. Obviously, if the Bush-Cheney tactic failed, the form, but not the substance, has to change.

New tactics

That refocusing was already drafted indeed by the Pentagon and the 'realpolitic' and energetic Robert Gates, who, also revealingly, will continue from Bush to Obama. Basically, the occupation is going to be 'redeployed' with more fortified military bases, with more use of surrogate forces using ethnic and tribal hierarchies. US soldiers simply said will be less exposed. The endless war will become more 'abstract', more remote, even perhaps less costly. In Iraq, the new 'accord' between the Iraqi government and Bush is along these lines. The US are about to complete a web of gigantic military forces on the outskirts of the cities. They have already built a huge surrogate army with the Kurdish warlords. They are paying a large part of the remnants of Saddam's army to chase out insurgents and prevent the national, Shia-led government of building a real state. The dream in Washington is that it will remain like that for decades to come.

The challenge

For resistance and alterglobalist movements, the challenges are huge. It will be difficult to raise attention to such an indirect and sophisticated strategy, at one level. It will also be difficult to distinguish ourselves from the opposition of competitors like Russia and China who will try, or appear, to 'lead' and instrumentalize the resistance against the US, through demagogic and sometimes reactionaries allies such as the Iranian regime. More fundamentally, the vast upsurge of the social movements in mostly South America and Southern Europe in the last years remains fragile. It has develop an alternative, cultural' hegemony (the 'battle of ideas'), but has been unable,

with notable exceptions, to change the rules of the games at the political level. The drift of social-democracy towards 'social-liberalism' continues unabated, even in South America where the hopes were high in the earlier part of the decade. In terms of opposing the endless war, this is big obstacle because social-liberals are at the best able to be a nuisance to the US, but not a real opposition (at the worst, they participate fully). We will have ahead of us huge confrontations to change that.

The Palestinian 'laboratory'

The recent deterioration with the Palestinians epitomize, I believe, that kind of challenges. Israelis and US elites have succeeded, to a large extent, in transforming resistance into a civil war. They have fragmented the occupied territories, even walling physically a whole population that now resides in an open-air prison. The occupation has redeployed, through political and technical means, and resistance has been fragilized (not eliminated), while the whole world sits out passively in a criminal complacency. The good news however is that Palestinian resistance goes on against the Petain-like administration of Mahmud Abbas, even (somehow) against the inert and chaotic Hamas rule in Gaza. In the meantime, there is that endless political crisis in Israel, an occupying power unable to occupy, but strong enough to prevent liberation forces to take over. Solidarity movements are also active, not quite as they were, but enough to keep the flame alive. Out of this mess arise new opportunities, challenges, and risks.