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### The Underpinnings of the Bush Doctrine

By Thomas Donnelly  
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#### ABSTRACT

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Does the Bush Doctrine represent a new course for American policy or simply an elaborate justification for the administration's actions? Why attack Iraq but not North Korea? What is the real role of preemption? What is wrong with the tried-and-true concepts of deterrence?

If nothing else, the Bush Doctrine, articulated by the president over the past eighteen months in a series of speeches and encapsulated in the new National Security Strategy paper released in September, represents a reversal of course from Clinton-era policies in regard to the uses of U.S. power and, especially, military force. So perhaps it is no surprise that many Americans--and others in the rest of the world as well--are struggling to keep up with the changes. Indeed, it often appears that many in the administration cannot keep up with the president. But in fact the Bush Doctrine represents a return to the first principles of American security strategy. The Bush Doctrine also represents the realities of international politics in the post-cold-war, sole-superpower world. Further, the combination of these two factors--America's universal political principles and unprecedented global power and influence--make the Bush Doctrine a whole greater than the sum of its parts; it is likely to remain the basis for U.S. security strategy for decades to come.

This does not mean that American leaders will be freed from the need to make unpleasant choices; North Korea's recent actions remind us of ways in which the possession by others of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles places limits on policy options. But the expansion of "the American perimeter"--those parts of the world where a liberal, democratic order is accepted as the norm--is likely to continue, even accelerate; having, at last, determined to reform the politics of the greater Middle East, we will find it difficult and dangerous to stop with half measures. The Bush Doctrine continues a tradition that can be traced to the Monroe and Truman doctrines. It is an attempt, in a new century and under new strategic circumstances, to "foster a world environment where the American system can survive and flourish," as Paul Nitze put it in 1950, in the famous "NSC 68" memorandum.

A comprehensive history of U.S. national security strategy is well beyond the scope of this article, but let it be stipulated that Americans always have taken an expansive view of their security interests and been more than willing to exercise military power where the correlation of forces is favorable. Blessed now with a global balance heavily weighted in favor of the United States, the Bush administration has declared itself ready to remove the rogue regimes and terrorists it regards as uniquely dangerous. For Americans, normal power calculations of "threats" and "opportunities" have been colored by an abiding faith in a set of political principles believed to have universal application. Americans have come to regard the exercise of their power as not simply a force for national greatness but for human liberty.

#### The Logic of American Primacy

Today, at least four realities argue convincingly for the continued and vigorous exercise of American national power, to include "preemptive" military actions. First of all, the fact of unprecedented American power is hardly in dispute. Those who oppose it find themselves frustrated by the seeming invincibility of American "imperialism." The French, for example, both lament and wonder at American *hyperpuissance*. Even Paul Kennedy, who famously foresaw American "imperial overstretch," now marvels at the scope of U.S. power. In a recent essay, he confessed to having made some "recalculations" of American power "as measured by the standard social science criteria," and came away with "the overwhelming impression of how far this single nation stood above all possible contenders as the global hegemon." With less than 5 percent of

world population, the United States generates about 30 percent of total world economic product, "a percentage that has actually increased in recent years." Indeed, Kennedy wrote, "even more remarkable is the size of the American military preeminence."<sup>[1]</sup> The campaign in Afghanistan only impressed him further:

Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing. . . . The Pax Britannica was run on the cheap, Britain's army was much smaller than European armies, and even the Royal Navy was equal only to the next two navies--right now all the other navies in the world combined could not dent American maritime supremacy. Charlemagne's empire was merely western-European in its reach. The Roman Empire stretched farther afield, but there was another great empire in Persia and a larger one in China. There is, therefore, no comparison.<sup>[2]</sup>

In other words, the fundamental premise of the Bush Doctrine is true: The United States possesses the means--economic, military, diplomatic--to realize its expansive geopolitical purposes. Further, and especially in light of the domestic political reaction to the attacks of September 11, the victory in Afghanistan and the remarkable skill demonstrated by President Bush in focusing national attention, it is equally true that Americans possess the requisite political willpower to pursue an expansive strategy.

Second, the description of the threats to U.S. interests advanced in the National Security Strategy is also an accurate one. America faces no immediate great-power threat, no superpower doppelgänger to replace the Soviet Union. The Russian empire has contracted to a 400-year "low," and Moscow has proven militarily incapable of subduing a single insurrectionist province. More importantly, Russia seems to have lost the appetite for empire, as it has become increasingly democratic and geopolitically inclined toward the West and the United States. The immediate post-cold-war fears of Russian revanche have not been realized.

The two other candidates as great-power balancers to American primacy, the People's Republic of China and the European Union, likewise are not immediately up to the challenge. A few observers believe that, as Europe becomes more politically integrated, it will take issue with American geopolitical leadership. "It is now Europe's turn to ascend and break away from an America that refuses to surrender its privileges of primacy," writes Charles Kupchan, a former Clinton administration official now at Georgetown University. "Europe will inevitably rise up as America's principal competitor." Some regard the defiance of France and Germany over Iraq as an occasion of "soft balancing"--the use of so-called "soft power" to offset American military might, diplomatic determination, and ideological motivation. Yet it does not seem as if

the Europeans will be successful in thwarting the Bush administration's march to war. It is far more likely that Europe will remain essentially content with its status as a junior partner in the current Pax Americana, demanding a certain amount of deference--and, after Iraq, perhaps very little deference--but still fundamentally unwilling to forge or employ the tools of "hard power" needed to create a genuinely multipolar international order.

China's economic growth over the past decade has fueled a program of military modernization that poses some particularly severe problems for the United States, such as across the Taiwan Straits. Further, these localized challenges may cause larger problems for a brittle American-led regional order based upon bilateral security partnerships between the United States and its East Asian allies. But Beijing does not yet have the ability to mount a broader regional--let alone global--challenge or lead an anti-American coalition. Moreover, the weakening of communist ideology in China and the advance of capitalism pose an internal problem of legitimacy for a regime in the throes of a generational leadership change. In addition, there may be international consequences for promoting an intense and aggressive Han nationalism as a partial remedy for these domestic problems. Beijing cannot style itself, as the United States reasonably can, as a benign hegemon.

Beyond potential great-power rivals there is good reason for continued concern over "rogue" states such as Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. These are modest powers with outsized ambitions that clearly see weapons of mass destruction as not simply a means to intimidate their immediate neighbors. They understand that, under a global security order headed by the United States, the first hurdle to becoming a regional hegemon is getting America out of the way. Nor are these regimes driven simply by external ambitions. Indeed, these regimes' internal position rests, in some measure, in having created hegemonic national ambitions--and their long-term survival in part rests upon seeming to satisfy them. Whatever the personal desires for glory among Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong Il, or the Iranian mullahs, they can also be driven by domestic political pressures to adopt a more aggressive posture.

Where the immediate opportunity for aggrandizement is limited by American power, these states are increasingly attracted to weapons proliferation and flirtations with international terrorist organizations. What under normal circumstances the United States might simply ignore--and often has ignored, even in the recent past--looms as a greater problem for America, its allies, and the international system. While coalitions of convenience among rogue states and terrorists may have been limited in the past and may carry inherent dangers for leaders of the rogue states themselves, the difficulty of resisting the Pax Americana is likely to mean that cooperation will increase in the future. Indeed, as the Bush Doctrine is further realized in Afghanistan and Iraq, cooperation could become

desperation.

Similar concerns add urgency to the "war on terrorism," which is, in truth, not a global war on all terrorist organizations--so far, the FARC in Colombia and the Irish Republican Army seemed to have escaped much attention from the Bush administration--but principally upon "Islamism,"

that violent political movement antipathetic to modernity and to the West, and especially to their expression through American power. The motivating core of this movement appears to be more "Arab" than "pan-Islamic," and often stems from the Saudi-funded spread of Wahhabism. It is like communism in that it is, in some measure, an ideologically motivated international political movement, though it relies upon the means of military weakness--terrorism--where the Soviet Union deployed great tank armies and nuclear arsenals.

Any comprehensive U.S. "threat assessment" would conclude that the normal constraints of international politics--counterbalancing powers--no longer immediately inhibit the exercise of American might. At the same time, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction promises to upset the "normal" rules of power among nation-states, devaluing the conventional military strength (and other kinds of power, as well) amassed by the United States. This undercuts the general peace won by the victory in the cold war and would complicate any future great-power competition or challenge to the American-led international order. Small "rogue" states and violent, but nevertheless weak, international movements like Islamic radicalism are coming to have a disproportionate "weight" in global security calculations. Moreover Islamism represents a kind of ideological threat to the Western political principles that made the end of the cold war against the Soviet Union also seem like the end of history.

A third reality that argues for assertive U.S. power is that the opportunities to extend a "balance of power that favors freedom"--or, more precisely, a preponderance of American power that favors freedom--outlined in the Bush Doctrine are genuine. The collapse of the Soviet Union is clearly making for a Europe "whole and free." Democratic practices are taking firmer root in cultures previously thought to be inhospitable, particularly in Asia, where Lee Kwan Yew's assertion of an authoritarian streak in "Confucian culture" looks increasingly suspect; Taiwan has spawned an almost raucous multiparty system and seen a peaceful transfer of power within it. In such a context, the Bush Doctrine's promise to liberalize the Islamic world--especially as it remains itself politically fractured--cannot be lightly dismissed, even if it may take many years to fulfill.

The opportunities to expand the Pax Americana also rest upon one of the few solid truths of social science: Democracies rarely war on other democracies. One of the reasons it is so hard to imagine the European Union becoming a genuine competitor to the United States is that there are no serious, direct transatlantic geopolitical disputes. Differences in the Middle East, for example, have no immediate relationship to the power balance between Europe and America--nothing today is analogous to the previous colonial competition. Nor is it easy to imagine a similar future struggle with Japan, Korea, India, or any Asian democracy. Those regions of the world that have, often because of the result of defeats in past wars, been brought into the American system do not require continued, heavy military occupation or imperial government. Pax Americana enjoys a "strategic rear" that is remarkably peaceful, prosperous, and free. What were once feuding great powers have more or less permanently, and apparently quite happily, ceded their security interests to American management.

A thorough "opportunities assessment" would conclude that the prospects for an expanded, American-led liberal international order are clouded by a military balance complicated by weapons proliferation. Nuclear weapons, in particular, now pose a deterrent threat to the United States; hopes for a stable and democratized Islamic world, for example, may be short-lived if Iraq or Iran were to acquire such a capability. We see already how the tiny North Korean arsenal--and its proclivities to proliferate--could confound America's position as the guarantor of East Asian security and democracy.

This suggests a fourth and final factor favoring the continued and vigorous exercise of American power: The realities of primacy, rising threats, and emerging opportunities combine to give the United States a "systemic" responsibility, that is, a responsibility for preserving the viability and legitimacy of the liberal international order of nation-states. A failure to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Baghdad--and indeed, a failure to continue the mission and replace the Ba'ath regime with at least a protodemocratic government--would materially change the global correlation of forces, to use Soviet-speak. Because power is measured everywhere in relation to the United States, regional events have greater global significance, beyond even the linkages supposed between cold war "dominoes."

### **The Logic of Preemption**

Taken together, American principles, interests, and systemic responsibilities argue strongly in favor of an active and expansive stance of strategic primacy and a continued willingness to employ military force. Within that context, and given the ways in which nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction can distort normal calculations of international power relationships, there is a compelling need to hold open the option of--and indeed, to build forces more capable of--preemptive strike operations. The United States must take a wider view of the traditional doctrine of "imminent danger," considering how such dangers might threaten not only its direct interests, but its allies, the liberal international order, and the opportunities for greater freedom in the world.

Yet practicalities limit the likelihood for an overly preemptive or "preventive" use of American military power. Despite the energetic rhetoric in the National Security Strategy, the immediate test of the Bush Doctrine's emphasis on preemption is not to be found in today's crises in Iraq and North Korea. The United States has been at war with Saddam Hussein for more than a decade; if an invasion comes it will be a response to past provocations as much as a preemption of future threats. And North Korea represents the nightmare that comes when weak states acquire superpower weapons; even a "regime change" strategy for Pyongyang would prefer other instruments to direct preemption, at least at this point.

Yet it takes little imagination to dream up other scenarios that might call for preemptive military action. Consider the choices for an American president if a radical regime overthrew, or simply defeated at the ballot box, the Musharraf government in Pakistan--would fears about Pakistan's nuclear weapons constitute an imminent danger? What about a massing of Chinese forces across the Taiwan Strait, perhaps preceded by an enlarged "missile embargo" of the sort attempted in 1996? These hypotheticals suggest that the heightened emphasis on preemption is not misplaced.

The preservation of today's Pax Americana rests upon both actual military strength and the perception of strength. The variety of victories scored by U.S. forces since the end of the cold war is testament to both the futility of directly challenging the United States and the desire of its enemies to keep poking and prodding to find a weakness in the American global order. Convincing would-be great powers, rogue states, and terrorists to accept the liberal democratic order--and the challenge to autocratic forms of rule that come with it--requires not only an overwhelming response when the peace is broken, but a willingness to step in when the danger is imminent. The message of the Bush Doctrine--"Don't even think about it!"--rests in part on a logic of preemption that underlies the logic of primacy.

## Notes

1. "The Colossus with an Achilles' Heel," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, fall 2001; available online at [http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2001\\_fall/colossus.html](http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2001_fall/colossus.html).
2. "The Eagle Has Landed," *Financial Times* (London), February 2, 2002.

*Thomas Donnelly is a resident fellow at AEI.*

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