

Europe, America and the Middle East  
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Let me begin by quoting the headings of a few articles. “Americans feel lonely in an angry world”, (1). “Alliance in a troubled mood”, (2). Or: “I wonder whether cool heads still prevail”, (3). The first and the third articles were published in 1980, the second in 1981. So we have been here before.

The early eighties were the time of the controversy on cruise missiles. The Dutch government of the day had to contend with a strong current of pacifism. A main cause of this current was the loss of religion, which redirected missionary zeal from the other world to this one. Many Dutch men and women embraced new values – authenticity, liberty, dialogue – with the ardour of the converted. “I find power eerie” said Bram Peper, mayor of the world’s largest port, (4). It seemed as if Rousseau had come to life again.

But the stationing of the SS-20 missiles by the Soviet Union was an attempt at political intimidation by military means which it was impossible for the West to leave unanswered.

The American journalist Robert Kagan recently wrote a much noted article in which he likened Europe to Venus and the US to Mars, (5). He maintains that the two sides of the Atlantic no longer share a common strategic culture. The EU wants to multilateralise the US. It wants to control the behemoth by appealing to its conscience. But these are the tactics of the weak. Europe seeks not power but the transcendence of power. That is its new *mission civilisatrice*. The US cooks the dinner, the EU does the dishes, writes Kagan.

Here Holland has shown the way. Mient Jan Faber, secretary of the Interchurch Peace Council said in the early eighties: “The problem of nuclear weapons is only the start. We are really interested in much more: the construction of a completely different culture, (4).

It is all a matter of what the Soviets used to call “the correlation of forces”. During the fifty years between 1620 and 1670 the United Provinces, as The Netherlands were then known, were a major force in the world: in politics, in culture, in science and at sea. But then “imperial overstretch”, to use a modern term, took its toll. The United Provinces could no longer close the Sont against the Swedes. So it turned to the law. The rule of law protected the weak. It also allowed Holland to occupy the moral high ground. A century ago the well known Dutch professor of international law Van Vollenhoven called Holland “ a beacon of light in a world of darkness”.

The correlation of forces between Europe and the United States is abundantly clear and the numbers are by now well known. The United States spends more on military R & D than the next six powers combined. This sum is more than Germany or the United Kingdom spends on defence in total. The American economy is twice as large as its closest rival, Japan. California by itself is the fifth largest economy in the world. And the US purchases its military pre-eminence with only 3.5% of its GDP. As the

historian Paul Kennedy noted: “Being Number One at great cost is one thing; being the world’s single superpower on the cheap is astonishing”, (6).

The United States has thus no rival in any critical dimension of power. Not only that, the American political scientists S.G. Brooks and W.C. Wohlforth have said, but the main potential challengers – China, Russia or Japan – cannot augment their military capacities without at the same time becoming an immediate threat to their neighbours. American pre-eminence is thus sustained by regional jealousies.

After the great European civil war of 1914-1945 Europe lost both its means and its taste for power politics. It also led to a loss of self-confidence which persists until today. Its last attempt at an independent foreign policy was the Franco-British incursion into Egypt in 1956, which foundered for lack of US support.

American statesmen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries professed to abhor the power play of Europe and its dark diplomacy. Now the shoe is on the other foot.

Meanwhile European integration has made once competing nation-states unite. It is a phenomenon of capital importance. It has ended Bismarck’s *Schaukelpolitik*. It has normalised Germany. No more will American soldiers have to die to preserve the balance on this continent. The EU is now a pole of attraction for all the states around it. Economically it is a world power. But politically and militarily it is a regional power, if that. Remember the qualms over Bosnia.

How does Europe react to American pre-eminence? It is a pre-eminence which will probably grow through the accession of the new member states, (7). Confucius writes how one man meets another and says “Why are you angry at me? Surely I have never done you a favour!”. Twice the US has helped to protect democracy in Europe. The Europeans have answered with sporadic thankfulness and constant irritation.. As my colleague Chris Patten recently said: “There is a tendency on this side of the ocean of condescension masquerading as sophistication”, (8).

Our anti-Americanism consists of envy and feelings of indebtedness. It is compounded by powerlessness and stimulated by the high visibility of American foreign policy. The need for the EU to have a Common Foreign and Security Policy is often defended with the dubious argument that the EU must offer a counterweight to the USA, (9).

But sometimes the need for a counterweight, is overwhelming. The secret droppings of weapons for the Bosniaks by unmarked American planes in 1995 are an instance. These droppings flew in the face of Operation Deny Flight, the UN-imposed and Nato-policed no-fly zone over Bosnia (10). There, the Americans cheated on their allies. This may well have been instrumental in forging the entente between France and the UK at St. Malo.

How will the US use its pre-eminent power? In September, President George Bush released the new National Security Document, which pretends to define a set of strategic principles for the foreseeable future. Firstly, the old doctrine of “containment and deterrence” is discarded in favour of preventive actions “when necessary to defend our liberty and our lives”. The second principle is to remake the Middle East,

(10). I shall turn to the Middle East in a little while. The first principle needs some words on the nation-state.

When the Peace of Westphalia was concluded in 1648, states were recognised as the constituent elements of the international order. Non-intervention was henceforth to be the guiding principle. It is confirmed in the Charter of the United Nations and the “Declaration of the Principles of International Law concerning friendly Relations and co-operation of States” of 1970. But this principle has not been uncontested nor is it unqualified.

John Stuart Mill wrote in 1867 that the doctrine of non-intervention needed to be reconsidered. To aid a freedom-loving people that was oppressed, he added, was not to disturb an equilibrium but to repair an equilibrium that had already been disturbed. Ten years later, on May 1877, the great liberal statesman William Ewart Gladstone spoke in the House of Commons on the same subject. He was then 68 years of age. He spoke for two-and-a-half hours. The speech, many thought, was his greatest triumph. He preached intervention in Turkey because the Bulgarian subjects of that country had been horribly maltreated. It was the so-called Eastern Question. Humanitarian intervention was what was needed, he said. Intervention in aid of foreign subjects.

Further, it is generally recognised that a state may intervene to protect its citizens abroad. The German intervention at the airport of Mogadishu and the Israeli one at the airport of Entebbe thus found ready justification.

Although the occupants of the WTC were not foreign subjects and did not live abroad on the eleventh of September, the American intervention in Afghanistan to defeat Al Qaeda is similarly justified. After all, the attack on the WTC was similar to an act of war. Also, the intervention was astonishingly successful. Any misgivings felt here and there melted away like snow in the sun.

Now what about Iraq? Firstly, the Ba’ath – the regime in power – is not Islamist. On the contrary, its inspiration is secular and nationalist. Yes, Saddam Hussein invoked the Islam in his war with Shi’ite Iran, but that was a stratagem. Nor have I read of any reports that have established a link between Al Qaeda and Iraq.

Secondly, the Iraqi certainly have chemical weapons – the inhabitants of Halabja, if there are any left, can testify to that – and probably biological ones. They also have some missiles that reach twice as far as the distance allowed to them under the relevant agreement. But according to my information they have neither the knowledge nor the fissionable material to construct an atomic bomb, although they are undoubtedly working on one.

Thirdly, they are now doing their best to be on friendly terms with their neighbours – no doubt in order not to give the US a pretext to intervene.

What does all this add up to? Saddam Hussein is a very nasty fellow and the world would be a safer place without him. His missiles could be loaded with chemical weapons, which would be a manifest threat to Israel. Does that constitute the “clear and present danger” which might warrant a preventive war?

Remember that Iraq is not the only state with chemical weapons. Remember that the US is not the only state that can carry out a preventive war. Think of India/Pakistan, China/Taiwan, North/South Korea. A precedent, once set, is difficult to erase.

So my answer is that a preventive war against Iraq would need the cover of a UN Security Council resolution, even though this means that the US would make themselves hostage to China and Russia.

Of course, the US has so far done very well in the Security Council. The last resolution was unanimously approved; even Syria voting in favour. It was a signal triumph of American diplomacy. The inspectors are back in again. The US is tightening the noose day by day. It is not unthinkable that it can achieve its aim without a preventive war.

But now the goal has changed. The goal is now to install a Muslim democracy, says Richard N. Haass, director of the policy planning staff of the State Department. Indeed, one sometimes hears in America: both Germany and Japan became democratic states after World War II.

Yes, but under completely different circumstances. The peoples of the Middle East have always been oppressed. They have never had the slightest experience of democracy. An Egyptian saying defines happiness as having “a stable job, a comfortable house, a beautiful wife, not to know the government, nor to be known by it”. Attempting to democratise the Middle East is truly a case of fools rushing in where angels fear to tread.

It seems to me that the more those peoples are oppressed, the more pro-American they become. At the end of the Gulf War BBC Television broadcast a report showing an Iraqi colonel on his knees in the sand. He was asked what he wanted. He replied: “I want to go to America”. The Muslim bourgeoisie wants its sons and daughters to study in the West. So how deep does all this go, given the theatrical quality of Middle Eastern politics?

Certainly, among the political intelligentsia and in particular the fundamentalists there is a strong anti-western current. It is not because of anything we do, it is because of what we are. We are powerful and wealthy and they are not. How is that possible, if they profess the True Religion?

Recently, the UNDP published the “Arab Development Report 2002”. It stated that “over the past 20 years, growth in income per head (of Arab countries), at an annual rate of 0,50%, was lower than anywhere else in the world except sub-Saharan Africa”. The cause of this sorry state of affairs lies in “the lamentable shortage of three essentials: freedom, knowledge and womanpower”. In its review of this report, the Economist noted that “more than half its young, burdened by joblessness and stifled by conservative religious tradition, are said to want to get out of the place as soon as they can”, (12). So resentment is likely to persist.

Official media in the Middle East are guilty of a constant stream of anti-western and anti-Semitic propaganda. That is unacceptable. But I persist in believing that those

countries do not pose a danger to the West: neither politically nor intellectually, neither militarily nor religiously. Al Qaeda is a sign not of strength but of despair.

Let me return to where I began. Militarily and politically, the EU is no match for the US. But other issues now come urgently to the fore: the protection of the environment; the fight against terrorist financing; against the drugs trade; against protectionism; against aids. Just as Europeans must understand that naked force sometimes is indispensable, so Americans cannot satisfy themselves by saying “My way or no way”. They must transform their considerable power into consensus.

## Notes

- (1) NRC-Handelsblad, 7-5-1980.
- (2) Times, 15-7-1981.
- (3) HP, 16-4-1980.
- (4) See my: "The Dutch Qualm Disease", (The Economist, 5-6-1982).
- (5) Robert Kagan: "Power and Weakness", (Policy Review no. 113).
- (6) S.G. Brroks & W.C. Wohlforth: "American Primacy in Perspective", Foreign Affairs, July/August 2002.
- (7) John Vinocur: "The big winner in the EU expansion: Washington", (IHT, 9-12-02).
- (8) "America and Europe: an essential partnership", speech to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Chicago, 3-10-2002.
- (9) Otto Graf Lambsdorff: "Transatlantische Beziehungen von dem Hintergrund eines sich wandelenden Amerikabildes in Europa", Brüssel, 5-11-02.
- (10) Gary Sick: "Imperial Moment", The World Today, December 2002.
- (11) "Allies and Lies", Correspondent, BBC, 24-6-01.
- (12) 6-7-02.