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## **Iraq War and Asia-Pacific Security**

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## **About the Speaker**

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## IRAQ WAR AND ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY

### **Effects of Iraq War on America's Strategic Position in the Asia-Pacific**

Following 9/11 and the launch of the war against terrorism, America's strategic position in Asia-Pacific strengthened as security cooperation with a number of key countries was stepped up. Japan deployed naval ships to the Indian Ocean to provide logistic support to the US fleet there while Indian naval ships escorted US ships carrying cargoes of ammunition, fuel and other important material. Security cooperation with Pakistan increased greatly. Security relations with the Philippines, Australia and Singapore strengthened further, with Australian troops participating in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Has this stronger US position suffered any significant setback as a result of the deployment of significant military assets to Iraq? On the surface not. Indeed it seems to have been reinforced by the dispatch of military, logistic or other forces to Iraq by a number of Asia-Pacific countries — Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Thailand and Singapore, as a demonstration of their solidarity with the US. The Americans have been pleased enough with the Philippines and Thailand to accord them the status of “major non-NATO allies”.

Nor on the surface has the balance of power between the major players in the Asia-Pacific been significantly altered. The US has a big lead in military technology and systems of war over potential rivals and foes, and its alliances and bases in the Asia-Pacific allow it to respond quickly to military contingences.

Yet some military and strategic analysts have pointed out that the US did not have enough combat elements of army, navy and air force left outside the Iraq theatre to effectively fight another major regional war if it had occurred during the month long conventional phase of the Iraq war and the period of build-up immediately

before it. The US had already cut its total deployable combat ready force strength world wide by over 40 per cent since the end of the Cold War, while accepting de facto political constraints on the inflicting of civilian casualties and collateral damage.<sup>1</sup> The recent intensification of the insurgency in Iraq and the need to delay by three months the departure of forces scheduled for rotation out of Iraq, suggests that the US already faces strategic overreach, given the fact that forces, with air, intelligence and reconnaissance assets are also deployed in Afghanistan and in other places as part of the war against terrorism. Thus any enthusiasm that the new and old conservatives in the Bush Administration might initially have had for another war of choice, say against Iran or Syria, after Iraq, must have been dampened by the Iraq experience.<sup>2</sup>

Important changes have been taking place in the US armed forces, part of Donald Rumsfeld's transformation of the US military, though these were mooted even before 9/11. Indeed Rumsfeld has seen the war against terrorism and the war in Iraq as a vindication of the need to transform the US military to a leaner, meaner force that is more agile, mobile and capable of responding to a wider variety of threats at long distances. However the deterioration of the situation in Iraq recently may lead to a questioning of this transformation if significantly more ground troops are needed to overcome the insurgency. The dilemma in part is the age-old one of balancing, within a limited defence budget, the costs of a leaner, technologically advanced force against the needs of more military manpower on the ground to deal with a variety of combat and threat situations.

### **Effects on American Comprehensive Power and the Policies of the Bush Administration**

But the strength of the world's only super power with global interests and commitments cannot depend just on its military power and military alliances. Indeed it has depended importantly on intangibles like trust and belief in the benign nature of its power and competence in its use which in turn have been underpinned by a manifest willingness to genuinely consult and cooperate with others.

In the Asia-Pacific region the Bush Administration has by and large relied on multilateralism and bilateral consultative diplomacy, apart from its bilateral alliances,

to deal with the critical security issues of the region, for instance terrorism, the Korean nuclear issue and the Taiwan Straits tensions. Forums like ASEAN, ARF and APEC have been used to garner support for some of America's security concerns. On the whole, after some learning experience, it has also shown sensitivity to the concerns of Muslim majority countries like Indonesia.

However, the Bush Administration's global policies, and in particular the Iraq war, have had negative effects on America's soft power. They have increased anti-Americanism among Muslim communities. The Iraq policies have generated unease and misgivings even among the friends and allies of the US. The fractured relations between the US and certain leading European powers and the unwillingness to involve the UN in a meaningful way early enough after the end of the conventional phase of the war have been troubling. So were the failure to anticipate the insurgency and its doggedness and the early decision of the occupation authorities to completely dismantle the previous regime's security forces.

It is probably true that Europeans have not fully appreciated how 9/11 has affected America. Further, the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the massive threat posed by the Soviet Union mean that America and Europe may no longer automatically take the same position on important external issues. Still there is the perception that the present US Administration's ideological bent, its non-responsiveness to other view points and its lack of subtlety and sophistication in handling relations with important allies have contributed to the deterioration of relations with European allies and the UN on Iraq.

The most critical security challenges facing the international community, in particular the threats of terrorism and proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), can only be addressed through maximum international cooperation. East Asian friends and allies of the US are likely to be less concerned about legal niceties per se than the practical consequences of the Bush Administration's ideological and unilateral tendencies. Toughness and resoluteness are indeed needed in the war against terrorism together with staying power in Iraq, but these qualities should be sheathed in a velvet glove of better international support and cooperation which will give the enterprise more legitimacy and success. An approach which has divided the

western alliance, led many Muslims to believe that the Bush Administration is waging a war against Islam, provided more recruits for radical and terrorist causes (see below) and damaged American soft power surely needs to be modified.

Indeed the most important effect of the Iraq war could be on US policies if beneficial changes are made as a result of the chastening Iraq experience, irrespective of whether Bush is re-elected as President or not.

### **Iraq War and the War against Terrorism**

Before the US-led invasion of Iraq, there was no serious evidence that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was supporting or working with Al Qaeda. Yet in the Bush Administration's strategic vision the two issues — Iraq and international terrorism — appear to have been linked even if there was little or no evidence of operational links. Saddam was seen as an implacable foe of America, unpredictable and untrustworthy, and potentially capable of providing shelter to international terrorists or cooperating with them on the principle that your enemy's enemy can opportunistically be your partner. Saddam's past predilection for WMD must have only heightened these concerns. Thus a defiant Saddam, cocking a snook at America, could not be tolerated in the post-9/11 Middle East. His removal and the building of a democratic and progressive Iraq under American tutelage was also seen as necessary for the broader American strategic scheme for reform in the Middle East to tackle the root causes of terrorism.

Unfortunately, the American invasion and occupation of Iraq has forged potent operational and ideological links between Iraq and international terrorism where barely any existed before. If the Bush Administration saw Iraq as a part of its broader strategic scheme in the war against terrorism, Al Qaeda and other Muslim radicals saw the invasion and occupation of a Muslim country by a Christian army (and largely an American one) as a situation ideal for exploitation to advance their own agenda.<sup>3</sup>

Three aspects of the Iraq war's impact on international terrorism have to be noted. First, the invasion and occupation of Iraq has increased anti-Americanism in the Muslim world, including in Southeast Asia. TV images of Iraqi civilian casualties

from US military action and of handling of Iraqi suspects by US forces during raids, continue to fuel this sentiment. The fact that no WMD have been found in Iraq, an important stated rationale for the war, nor any convincing link established between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al Qaeda, has only increased suspicion of American motives, especially among Muslim intellectuals. Accompanying this anti-Americanism is a likely increase in the numbers of Muslims, especially in the Arab world, who share the radical ideology that Muslims are under attack from Christians and Jews, making them potential recruits for terrorist organizations. Pro-Western Arab regimes find themselves under pressure as radical groups, including Al Qaeda, try to turn against them the tide of anti-American feeling fuelled by developments in Iraq and by America's perceived support of Israel.

Second, if, after the loss of Afghanistan as an operational zone and base, the terrorists needed a new theatre of conflict to radicalize Muslims and turn out a new generation of jihadists, Iraq has provided it. Al Qaeda web-sites have, since the outbreak of the Iraq war, been urging Muslims to go to Iraq to fight the Americans. Most of those who have heeded this call so far are from the Levant — Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Syria — and from Western Europe. The alumni of this conflict could become a threat to their own countries on their return home in the same way as those who had trained and fought in Afghanistan. So far there is no evidence that Southeast Asian Muslims have gone to fight in Iraq and no operational links have been detected between JI in Southeast Asia and radicals fighting in Iraq. However, this does not mean such links will not be forged in the future, especially if the situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate, though the vigilance of Southeast Asian governments will remain a constraint on any significant participation by Southeast Asian radicals in the conflict in Iraq.

Third, the link between the Iraq war and terrorism was dramatically illustrated by the terrorist bombings in Madrid in late March 2004 on the eve of the Spanish general elections. The terrorists skilfully exploited the widespread anti-Iraq war sentiments among the Spanish public, giving the impression that they were punishing the country for its involvement in Iraq and its close alliance with the US, and in the process succeeded in getting the pro-US governing party defeated in the election. A

terrorist group was reported to have offered a “truce” to Spain if it pulled out its troops from Iraq. Since public opinion in most other countries with troops in Iraq has largely been against the American invasion and occupation of the country, there could be more terrorist outrages with the aim of getting the publics in these countries to pressurize their governments to withdraw their troops from Iraq. Thus Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda-linked organizations are getting directly involved in the struggle for the future of Iraq. Indeed, on 15 April 2004 Al Arabiya broadcast an audio-tape purportedly from Osama bin Laden in which he offered European countries a “truce” if “they do not attack Muslim countries”. The CIA was reported to have said that the tape was probably authentic. Radical groups can be expected to also threaten or carry out terrorist attacks in Asia-Pacific countries that have sent troops to Iraq.

A new development that has taken place since the Iraq war is the outbreak of violence in January 2004 in southern Thailand. Police, military and government installations have been targeted in the region. The attacks are reported to have come from a new Muslim radical group set up in 1997 and espousing Salafi jihadist ideology, as does Al Qaeda.<sup>4</sup> So far no link has been found with Al Qaeda or JI, but the Thai government suspects such links. Thailand’s tougher anti-terrorist stance since mid-2003 (including the arrest of JI leader Hambali) and its decision to send troops to Iraq could be among the factors behind this resort to violence, in addition to local factors in south Thailand.

Iraq is not yet stabilized. The danger of increased instability, even civil war, cannot be ruled out. A worsening of the situation could provide Al Qaeda-related and other radical groups more opportunities to advance their cause.

## **Effects on Major Asian Powers**

### *China*

Over the past few years an increasing pragmatism in China’s foreign policies has been discernible. A combination of factors brought this about — the need to concentrate on domestic development and modernization, confidence deriving from China’s growing economic progress, and the realization that China’s growing economic dependence on the outside world for investments, markets, energy and other raw

materials has given it a stake in international order and stability and therefore greater coincidence of interests with the advanced Western countries. Certain shared strategic interests with the US, including the war against terrorism, have also contributed to this trend. In addition, the toughness and resoluteness of the US Administration since January 2001 and its clear willingness to use American power to protect or advance American interests is likely to have been a factor in the internal policy debates within China between the more hawkish and more pragmatic forces.

China seems to be increasingly inclined to the view that the stabilization of Iraq is necessary for a stable Middle East, the main source of the world's energy supplies, and for the war against terrorism. Early in 2004, a Chinese team went to assess the situation in Iraq and China may well contribute to its rebuilding once there is greater UN involvement.

An important effect of America's war on terrorism and then the war on Iraq is that it has given China more space and elbow room to pursue its interests in the Asia-Pacific without automatically arousing the suspicions or opposition of the Bush Administration. This must be a relief for it considering the fact that in the early days of the Bush Administration, before 11 September, the focus was to be on China's rise. While the military balance in the Asia-Pacific may not have altered, much of the Bush Administration's quality time is taken up with matters related to the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Furthermore, it needs the cooperation of China not only in relation to terrorism but also Korea, Taiwan Straits and broader proliferation concerns.

China has been active diplomatically in the region, especially in relation to Southeast Asia, pursuing its strategic interests through initiatives like the proposal for a free trade area with ASEAN.

### *Japan*

Japan under Prime Minister Koizumi's leadership has been moving cautiously towards becoming a more normal power that can help to assume some of the burdens and obligations of international security, especially in view of the fact that it is a technologically advanced country with the world's second largest economy. Japan wants to do this not unilaterally, but either multilaterally (with UN or coalition arrangements) or as an ally of the US. Iraq is obviously not driving this trend. It is driven more by the changed circumstances in Northeast Asia, especially the perceived nuclear and missile threat from North Korea and the rise of China.

However, Koizumi has tried to use the international situation created by the war against terrorism and then the war in Iraq to move Japan in this new direction. In 2002, in a historic move, Japan deployed its naval ships to the Indian Ocean to provide logistic support to US naval forces engaged in the Afghan campaign. In 2003 Japan sent troops to help stabilize Iraq — the first time it has done so in a country where there is ongoing conflict and casualties can be incurred. By doing so, Japan has increased the ire of radical Islamic groups that may go out of the way to inflict casualties on Japanese troops in Iraq. They may also try to mount terrorist attacks in Japan itself. It is uncertain how Japanese public opinion will react if there are significant Japanese casualties in Iraq or terrorist attacks on Japanese soil. Koizumi's plan to move Japan towards the assumption of greater international security responsibilities could suffer a significant setback if public opinion in the country then forces him to pull out the Japanese troops from Iraq.

### *India*

In India's perception, American strategic presence in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Central Asia is there to stay. The invasion and occupation of Iraq in furtherance of US political and strategic objectives in the Middle East only reinforces this conclusion. On the whole New Delhi views this change in the strategic landscape as positive for India.

As the largest Indian Ocean littoral state, a rising power with growing naval potential, and a relatively stable, secular force, India has become strategically more

important to the US. Thus strategic cooperation between the two countries which has already increased in recent years is likely to increase further — in the war against terrorism, in securing the sealanes of the Indian Ocean in the context of energy security, and eventually to balance China. American pressures on Pakistan since 9/11 have led to more moderate and responsible domestic and external policies in Pakistan, which is good for India. India recognizes that the US needs to work closely with Pakistan in its war against terrorism in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region. However, the US move to accord Pakistan the status of a major non-NATO ally of the US has caused some misgiving in India regarding possible transfer of new weapons systems to Pakistan.

The US had pressed India in 2003 to contribute to the stabilization of Iraq by sending Indian troops. India had to refuse because public opinion would have been strongly against it in view of the large Muslim population in India, India's traditional friendship with Iraq and the fact that the US-led invasion and occupation had not been sanctioned by the UN. However if in the future the Iraq operation is put under the UN umbrella, with focus on reconstruction, India may be willing to provide troops at the request of the UN.

### **Effect on Muslim Countries In Southeast Asia And Their Relations With America**

While the Iraq war has increased negative perceptions of the US in the two main Muslim-majority countries, relations with the governments have not been significantly, leave alone irreversibly, damaged. The interactions of the US with these two countries are naturally more complex than with other friendly countries in East/Southeast Asia. Both Malaysia and Indonesia opposed the Iraq war and Muslim sentiment in both countries was strongly against it. Politicians found it necessary to manage the latter problem, sometimes through anti-American stances and statements.

Indonesia presents an interesting case. Concern that the radicals would seek to take advantage of popular sentiment against the Iraq war led the two large moderate Muslim organizations, the NU and Muhammadiyah, to organize big peace rallies when the Iraq war began. State-to-state relations with the US have been uneasy at times, but this has had to do as much with other factors, like US pressures in relation

to alleged human rights violations and the war against terrorism, as the Iraq war. On terrorism, while the US would like Indonesia to take more robust security action against the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist organization, it has also been sensitive to Indonesia's domestic constraints.

Malaysia's relations with the US which had strengthened after the new Bush Administration took charge, and especially after 9/11, suffered some setback because of the Iraq war. The US Administration did not take kindly to Dr Mahathir's strong criticisms. Nevertheless, US-Malaysia relationship is multi-faceted — good intelligence cooperation continued in the war against terrorism, notwithstanding the Iraq war, and the programme of bilateral military exchanges and cooperation continued mostly unaffected, though Malaysia, unlike Thailand and Singapore, did not allow overflight of American military aircraft on the way to Iraq theatre of operations.

Yet, it has to be acknowledged that the increase of anti-Americanism in the Muslim countries of Southeast Asia as a result of the Iraq war is a serious matter. It is something governments have to take into account in their foreign policies, especially governments in democratic Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Malaysia who have to contest elections regularly. However, it is interesting that, in electoral terms, opposition to the Iraq war and the rise in anti-Americanism are not translating into more votes for Islamic fundamentalist political parties. In fact in the Malaysian general election of March 2004 the Islamic party was trounced, losing considerable support compared with the previous 1999 election. In the Indonesian election of April 2004 parties calling for a syariah state are expected to get less than 15 per cent of the vote that they received in the 1999 election.

### **Implications for Nuclear Proliferation**

The Iraq war may have indirectly had some beneficial effects in relation to the nuclear proliferation issue. Negotiations with Libya were taking place even during the Clinton Administration to persuade it come out clean on the Lockerbee bombing and to end its WMD programmes. However, it is likely that the application of the Bush Administration's doctrine of pre-emption to Iraq contributed to the breakthrough

(even though in the end no WMD were found in Iraq). Libya clearly got the message, especially since it is much smaller and more vulnerable than countries like Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

North Korea would have got two messages. First, that the Bush Administration was resolute on the nuclear issue and might use force. But this message is perhaps less important since Pyongyang has feared this all along in any case, even before the Iraq war, and indeed it could in part have been spurring the North Korean nuclear drive. The more important message would be that a deal might be possible because Libya was given security assurances and economic and technical assistance in exchange for completely giving up its WMD programmes. North Korea is likely to be watching closely how the US treats Libya — e.g. if all sanctions are genuinely lifted and economic assistance is provided.

There has been another beneficial effect. The rest of the world, in particular the United Nations and the leading nations of the European Union, alarmed by the prospect of US unilateralism and pre-emptive strikes (remember, there was genuine concern at one time: who next after Iraq — Iran or North Korea?), have redoubled their efforts to ensure that Iran does not produce nuclear weapons.

On the whole, there is now better international cooperation on preventing nuclear proliferation. The latest boost for this cooperation would undoubtedly have come from the revelation of an extensive black market in nuclear materials run by a Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan.<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Although the war in Iraq has not shifted the strategic balance between the major powers in the Asia-Pacific in a fundamental way, US military forces appear stretched fighting three wars — Afghanistan, Iraq and the war against terrorism — and much of the US administration's quality time is taken up by Iraq. This means that US policies towards East Asia will continue to seek to avoid conflict and try to resolve problems, e.g. the Korean nuclear issue, through negotiations. US will attach importance to cooperation with regional powers like Japan, India, and above all, China. This allows China more elbow room to promote its interests in the region, but it also provides

opportunities for Japan to raise its security profile as it seeks to become a more 'normal' power. US-India strategic cooperation can be expected to develop further.

The Iraq war has damaged America's soft power, its relations with key European allies, and its standing among the Muslim communities almost worldwide. The way the peace building and nation building work in Iraq has been handled has caused widespread unease even among friends of the US. On the domestic US front, the Iraq factor could still lead to the election defeat of President Bush. Policy changes away from unilateralism and an ideological mindset are likely, whoever is President in 2005. Some policy changes, for instance towards the UN, are already underway.

Perhaps the most dangerous consequence of the Iraq war has been the boost it has given to Islamic radicals and terrorists. It has provided them with a new cause, a new inspiration, a new theatre for their baptism of fire and for turning out battle hardened jihadists who will be used at some point to destabilize their home countries, in particular Saudi Arabia. So far there is no evidence that any Southeast Asian radicals have fought in Iraq nor any known operational links between JI and foreign fighters in Iraq. However, regional and international terrorist groups can be expected to attempt attacks in Asia-Pacific countries which have sent troops to Iraq.

The Iraq war has had some beneficial effects on global non-proliferation efforts, but it is not clear if it will be a factor of any significance in efforts to resolve the Korean nuclear issue.

## NOTES

1. See for instance "Lessons of the Iraq War", Anthony H. Cordesman, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, July 2003 [http://csis.org/features/iraq\\_instantlessons\\_exec.pdf](http://csis.org/features/iraq_instantlessons_exec.pdf).
2. Prof Anthony Cordesman wrote as follows in August 2003: "The US needs to avoid additional military commitments and conflicts unless they truly serve vital strategic interests...The US already faces serious strategic overreach, and nothing could be more dangerous than assuming that existing problems can be solved by adding new ones — such as Syria or Iran," in *Four Wars and Counting...The Need for a New Approach to Strategy and Force Planning*, Web: <http://www.csis.org/burke/reports/030827fourwars.pdf>
3. Al Qaeda has also been trying to exploit the growing bitterness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with its tit-for-tat suicide bombings and assassinations of

Hamas leaders. This conflict is another radicalizing influence in the Muslim world. In the perception of most Muslims America is condoning, if not supporting, Israel's actions and policies towards the Palestinians. It would indeed be ironical and tragic if Al Qaeda also succeeds in co-opting this conflict into its universal jihad against the West, something that has seemed highly improbable in the past.

4. This information comes from the Terrorism Unit, headed by Dr Rohan Gunaratna, of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore.
5. Despite the better international cooperation to halt proliferation, the challenges are formidable. It is still far from certain if North Korea's nuclear programme can be rolled back and ended or even if Iran can be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons. Nuclear proliferation is arguably a bigger security threat than terrorism per se because if terrorists are able to acquire nuclear devices they will be far more destructive to global peace and economic well being.

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