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Perspectives

America Could Blow It All



A few months ago, a friend and I discussed US Secretary of State Powell's frantic drive to assemble a broad coalition against the War On Terrorism. My bet was that the many allies the US was trying to "rope in" would prove unworthy. I argued that they'd joined for all the wrong reasons. The US had pressured them to come on board and to be on the inside had no meaningful disadvantages: they needed to take little responsibility, but had considerable insight into America's plans. Most important, if things didn't go well, they could complain and distance themselves.

My friend, a European, also predicted an early end to the coalition, but for entirely different reasons. His prognosis was that the Americans would manage to offend their coalition members and thus sabotage their own policy. After all, he explained, Washington's relationships with other nations had always been dominated by business considerations and not philosophical links, and the two of them would sooner or later collide. "When that happens", he predicted, "America's allies would be outraged, but America itself will hardly notice".

From Powell's error...

So far, we've both been right. It took only a few photographs of Al Qaida and Taliban captives to make the valiant allies doubt their alliance with America; and a few days later, George W. Bush's "axis of evil" comment did the rest. As of a month ago, every single Western nation had roundly condemned the US plan to continue the War On Terrorism if it meant any broadening of its scope. The allies' commitment, as I'd pointed out, had never been identified. What Colin Powell had hurriedly assembled was a message board to the world that advertised how united the West stood against terrorism—then the first rain came and washed Powell's message away. There was only one surprise: how very fast everything had come unraveled.

What's shocking to me is how right my friend has been—evidently, I have a capacity to overestimate America. In the past month, the US has done its best to steadily chip away at the few voices of support for its policies that still exist. The Europeans are miffed because George Bush, the supposed free trader, has introduced steel tariffs; and the Canadians have been hit hard by what most analysts agree are illegal import taxes on lumber. Both Europe and Canada feel they've gone out of their way to help the US in the wake of September 11 and wonder how they've deserved such treatment.

...to Tenet's blunder

Russia, who's probably done more than anyone to cozy up to the US, is also reeling. In a speech to the US Senate Armed Services Committee on March 19, CIA Director George Tenet named Russia among seven countries that are potential nuclear targets. The reason, according to Tenet, is that Russia is "the first choice of proliferant states seeking the most advanced technology and training" for weapons of mass destructions.

Tenet may well be right, but the fact that terrorists can access the "raw materials" to weapons of mass destruction is not because Russian policy creates that opportunity, but because Russia (much like the US and China) is a major power with a vast arsenal of such weapons. By singling out Moscow as a potential target for a nuclear strike, the US risks not only reversing recent gains in its relationship with Mr. Putin, but it has also weakened Putin within the Russian power structure. Quite apart from that, it's moronic and unnecessary to table an official list of nuclear targets. At the very least, Tenet's comments assure that current plans to "destock" weapons of mass destruction will be delayed; at worst, the CIA chief has unleashed a race to add to existing stockpiles. (As an aside, China is also on America's official list of nuclear targets. The Chinese leadership has loudly protested the US policy and last week denied permission to a US warship to dock in Hong Kong.)

Which brings up an important question: is there anyone the US has managed not to offend during the past four weeks or so? The answer may well be no, and that is the lamentable bottom line to the current situation.

Lamentable bottom-line

I have never been one to suggest that the US should be out to appease others, or even shy away from what is in America's best interest. All countries do and that, after all, is what its governments get elected to do. What Washington has recently been doing, however, is burning political capital without gaining any offsetting advantages. That, by anyone's definition, is utterly stupid.

In the wake of September 11, the US had the world's sympathy. But like my friend rightly predicted, economic interests have been allowed to supersede value considerations. The tariffs on steel will hurt Europe and Russia considerable, while the softwood lumber tax will eliminate large numbers of jobs in Canada. This will not only propel anti-American sentiment to new highs, it will also cause a spate of retaliatory acts, as a result of which the US may well lose. My friend was also correct when he pointed to America's proverbial lack of awareness as a major cause of trouble to come. Comments like CIA boss George Tenet's would never have been allowed if the US leadership were not incredibly parochial. It's telling that the economic and political US actions I've just written about were decried in headlines everywhere, while America's media hardly reported them.

Is there any hope that the US will get its act back together? I believe there is, but much damage has been done. I view the recent blunders as a necessary consequence of having a president who is caught in the web of conflicting bits of advice from his mostly able and experienced advisors. If President Bush wants to come out on top and maintain US prestige and credibility, he better start acting according to his convictions.

When running for President and during his first months in office, he articulated these clearly. They embraced the principles of free trade and markets and promised to overhaul one of the industrialized world's poorest educational environments, and a badly ailing health care system and an energy policy that leaves America perennially vulnerable. After September 11, George W. Bush vowed to oppose terrorism wherever he could. The next few months will be crucial. They'll show whether Mr. Bush is simply a figurehead, swayed by outside influence and pressure, or whether he's a man of character who can listen to the voices of experience that surround him and act according to conviction. □

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