

The Iraqi Conflict Puts a Strain on Transatlantic Relations

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The invasion of Iraq by United States troops in March 2003 has prompted an important crisis in the Atlantic Alliance. The first antecedent leading up to this military operation lies of course in the attacks of 11th September 2001. Almost everything that can be said concerning the situation has been said, but sufficient explanation has not been given regarding the extent that the Bush administration believes the average American has been influenced by the attacks.

But this does not clear the obscurity surrounding Bush's decision to attack Iraq. The invasion of Afghanistan, shortly after the attacks were carried out, can be justified, but the attack on Iraq has not been explained. Iraq is a country with no weapons of mass destruction and without a proven connection with the networks of Al Qaeda, at least at the current time.

It has been suggested (William Pfaff, *International Herald Tribune*, 11-8-2003; Geoffrey Sachs, *Financial Times*, 13-8-2003; Michael Meacher, *The Independent*, 6-9-2003) that there were further, so far un-revealed, reasons for invading Iraq: in the first place, the need to change the location of the American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia since 1991. Riyadh had reiterated to Washington the need to abandon Saudi territory, and both religious and political reasons provided a basis, not unfounded, for the request of the Saudi leaders. But there were also the relations with people or private institutions close to the Bush Administration to be preserved.

The United States needed to maintain its troops in the area of the Persian Gulf. Some of the neoconservative think tanks advised Bush to invade Iraq. The invasion meant a solid response to the attacks, while at the same time the US was adopting positions in the Middle East; positions that ensured the control of a country that is the second or third world producer of oil. Moreover, an unfinished operation, started by Bush's father in 1991, was completed. The possibility for George W. to go one better than his father was perhaps too strong a temptation. Although Bush Jr. would be nothing in his country without his family background (his story is a classic case of a politician who owes his political connections to his father), the instinctive drive that this feeling awakens in heirs has been analysed for 100 years, beginning with psychiatric studies in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century.

But there are yet other reasons for the invasion of Iraq, of which here we can mention three: Firstly, the request of the so-called «average American», who demanded a response to the 9/11 attacks. Bush decided to give them their reaction with the invasion of Iraq, and the elections of November 2004 will show whether he judged rightly or wrongly. Secondly, the need for a military confrontation, which is always demanded by the big supply companies of the Pentagon (there is no better way of knowing the effectiveness of a country's technology than testing it on the battlefield). And, finally, the insistent petitions of oil companies and their associates, which proved difficult for Bush to reject.

It is not impossible for the United States to rectify the situation. There are clear

signs of change in Bush, who returns once again to the United Nations. On 16th October 2003, Resolution 1511 was unanimously approved.

All these risks and contradictions have opened a crevice in Euro-American relations, and a considerable part of the Europe in formation has distanced itself from the United States. The neoconservative trends of Washington have produced a growing rejection in several European governments, not only the notable denunciation from France and Germany.

We should not forget, however, the deep, permanent, and solidly founded relations between the societies of the United States and of the Europeans. Commercial exchanges in either direction surpass 330,000 million dollars per year, and mutual investments amount to more than 500,000 million. These are enormous figures, which have no comparison in any other region of the world (US-China trade is less than one twelfth the amount, while the American and Chinese investments in the People's Republic and the United States are nineteen times lower).

The strength of these societies is evident through the daily, silent and deeply set relations, and their weight is much greater than the statements exchanged between governments. And this is also the result of the globalisation that the governments are forced to respect. Space ship Earth, to use the image of Edgar Morin, is being unified beyond the powers of decision of the apparently commanding governors, who are no more than passengers. And, yet, decisions such as that of Iraq leave a long trail in their wake. For the moment, the gap between Europeans and Americans has been widen-

ed. Perhaps through a clearer awareness of their past, Europeans in general are more humble, by which I am referring above all to central Europeans and to the Holocaust. The temptation of using force can be difficult to ignore when your country is as strong as the United States, and when many Americans maintain that peculiar border mentality that surprises so many Europeans. But the temptation of force can sometimes be deceptive, as we have seen throughout these past months in Iraq.

The positions of France and Germany will possibly prevail among the Europeans. The United Kingdom has made its approach to the Franco-German axis clear after the visit of Prime Minister Tony Blair to his French and German colleagues in Berlin, in September 2003. Meanwhile, Italy shows a kind of neutrality to conceal the shaky *Bushism* of March. A combination of change and necessity meant that debates on the draft of the European Constitution were initiated in autumn 2003, coinciding with the crisis following the invasion of Iraq.

The draft of the European Constitution, of which the main contributor has been the President of the Convention, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, is a good text, and is clear, concise and conclusive. It also includes criteria from the different trends. If the project goes ahead, in the current Intergovernmental Conference, this will represent a very important step in the construction of Europe.

But these are superficial skirmishes. The deep river of History winds its way through other streams. Other factors are set to determine the first fifty years of the new century:

- The United States must decide between a more centrist direction and

a tough right-wing line, something that is difficult to imagine in the long term. The American presidents, from Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton, have always been, with few exceptions, great quality politicians. It is possible that George W. Bush is the most doubted president since Herbert Hoover in 1930. But the system of the Founding Fathers tends to rectify itself, and the only danger is that the influence of hidden money in the political machine has so affected the wise mechanism that its weight is noticeable in the next election. This would be the slippery slope that the essayist William Pfaff has been denouncing for the last twenty years.

- The European Union will keep advancing, slowly but surely. Europe will sooner or later establish a defence policy, after having advanced in the last few years in the processes of legal and monetary union. Europeans must have a common citizenship that will not eliminate that of their individual states.
- The emergence of China can be balanced with the economic strength of Japan in its phase of recovery, and with the appearance of the democratic republic of the Indian Union. China's political opening does not so far appear to rouse confidence in the short and middle term. Not because of threats such as those from Tibet, Taiwan or Korea, but because of the internal difficulties around which politics and economics are constantly intertwined.
- The lack of direction in the Arab world, in need of unity, will maintain the inefficiency of the region if no new factors appear in the future to promote its integration. The geographic adscription of the main religions no longer seems to be arguable.

- The evolution of the post-industrial world, and its responses to the destruction of the environment caused by the oil, coal and wood companies, may be decisive in the next ten years. The European Union has made much further advances in this field than the United States. The policy of Washington, which currently lacks any respect for future generations, will change slowly. The Arab countries will sell oil and gas as long as there is a market for it, and not just through the demands of Europe or America.
- As matter that is of particular interest to Europe, is that after a period of democratic evolution, the construction of intermediate boards and institutions will gradually free Latin American countries from the new threats of economic decline that would otherwise lead to their political deterioration. The stability of the continent, from the south of the United States to the Magallanes Strait, is vital for the Spanish development. Brazil will be able to raise its might as the great South American leader, and become a strategic ally of the European Union. The potential strength of Brazil could constitute a pole of global attraction for economic investments, and for political alliances.

This is a possible and a realistic scheme which points towards a multipolar world with a dominant power that may last for many years, but in which a series of powers can agree to forge multilateral relations with that power and with each other. These relations are safer than the absolute hegemony simulated after the crisis of the 11th September. Good sense tends to impose itself with a frequently unsuspected strength and tenacity.