

GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES FOR THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Translated by Roger Leverdier

Numerous parallels have been drawn, particularly by the president of the United States, between 11 September 2001 and the beginning of the Second World War. In his speech to Congress a few days after the terrorist attacks, George W. Bush said: "On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars, but for the past 136 years they have been wars on foreign soil except for one Sunday in 1941." Since then, the American president has repeatedly compared the shock of 11 September to that of Pearl Harbour, and the war against Iraq to the war against Japanese militarism. Others regard the 'war on terror', as the White House has officially named it, as a new Cold War. Robert Hutchings, chairman of the National Intelligence Council (a government think tank linked to the CIA), claims the answer to the terrorist threat lies in the policy of 'containment' first formulated by the diplomat George Kennan in relation to the Soviet Union¹. Historical references may vary (some commentators, including George W. Bush, have also compared the 'war on terror' to the First World War), but there is general agreement that the United States has been at war since 11 September 2001, and that the conflict is unfolding on a global scale. This view provides the basis for a minimal consensus that unites prominent Democrats – John Kerry, Bill and Hillary Clinton – as much as it does the Republican Party. Is this therefore the basic explanation for international developments since the events of little more than three years ago? Are we therefore in the initial stages of a war, hot or cold, which is soon to spread across the entire planet?

The presentation of history

It is difficult to attribute historical significance to contemporary events, even when they are as dramatic as those of 11 September. The ability to imbue history with meaning as it unfolds, to convince one's entourage of the validity of one's own interpretation of the facts, requires certain political talents. But the right to impose this meaning on the rest of the world, to rally most countries around a given interpretation of such events, is a matter of power. Only a heavyweight can formulate a vision of the world and use it to construct an authoritative framework for the interpretation of international relations. When President Truman, responding to Great Britain's request in March 1947, agreed to combat communist influence in Greece and Turkey, he formally announced America's entry into the new bipolar confrontation. More precisely, he declared the opening of the Cold War by according it the status of a global conflict. The term 'Cold War' is itself largely an American creation: introduced by the British writer George Orwell, it was popularised in the United States and abroad by the journalist Walter Lippman. Now the Cold War was as much

¹ Robert I. Hutchings, "X+9/11", *Foreign Policy*, no.143, July-August 2004.

a reality as a representation of the facts of the international situation. Shortly after World War II, American politicians, analysts and experts, including George Kennan, concluded that the USSR had become a threat to the United States, and therefore to the entire world. Kennan believed the stakes involved in this emerging conflict were necessarily global because, in reality, an attack on the US constituted an attack on the universal values represented by what he called “this nation among nations”, “this great nation”. The events of the late 1940s became readily understandable once they had been subjected to a strategic evaluation (the threat to America posed by the USSR and communism), then expressed through the metaphorical discourse of the ‘Cold War’, a global conflict in which Freedom, personified by the American nation, pitted itself against Totalitarianism.

So among other things, the Cold War was a grand geopolitical narrative. The fact that it became the dominant world view and the principal explanation for the international situation is related to America’s power – not only its military, technological and economic strength, but also the influence it was able to wield, especially through its media, universities and think tanks. The function of a geopolitical narrative is to set out in a clear, quasi-visual manner arguments that will stimulate at least the mobilisation of the nation and, if possible, the greater part of the international community. That is why it is an issue of power and rivalry. After the Bandung Conference in 1955, decolonised countries and others in the process of decolonisation, nations that would later form part of the ‘Third World’, attempted to distance themselves from the Cold War geopolitical narrative. In a gradual and uncoordinated fashion, they constructed a different narrative according to which the world was no longer divided between East and West but between North and South. This alternative reading of international relations had little impact on the constitution of the global agenda. In the early 1970s, the UN began to advocate a new economic order; for the first time, the question of unequal development was treated as an important component of international policy. But until 1989, the global agenda (‘high politics’) was essentially shaped by an understanding of the world derived from the prism of East-West opposition. The fall of the Berlin Wall bestowed no new legitimacy upon the North-South scenario. In fact, quite the opposite occurred. This was not because the reality on which it was based had disappeared – the gap between rich and poor countries had not decreased – but because of the rapid imposition of a new geopolitical narrative: globalisation. After 1989, it was suddenly assumed that the great bipolar divisions – East-West and North-South – no longer existed; international affairs were being organised into a kind of global continuum. For example, poverty would henceforth be fought on a ‘global scale’ that encompassed the slums of rich western cities as well as the less developed countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. But can we seriously compare the causes, or even the conditions, of the destitution of a minority in a rich country (given the potential access to health services, education and social benefits) to those of the bulk of the population in a poor country? However, such confusion persists, and the antiglobalisation lobby is not immune to it. In this respect, the latter, which might more appropriately be called the alternative globalisation movement, does not challenge the fundamental idea behind the globalisation narrative. It accepts the principle of international unity, of a global continuum. To be sure, the

movement condemns the inequality and inefficiency within this space – that is the basis for its alternative programme of global management – but it does not acknowledge the existence of any great bipolar divide, on a global scale, in the manner of the Cold War and North-South narratives. On the other hand, developments since 11 September seem to be characterised by a return to this form of narrative.

The return of the bipolar narrative

The commission charged with investigating the attacks of 11 September 2001 concluded in its published report² that the United States faced a new enemy: Islamic terrorism. The definition of the adversary is well suited to a dichotomous representation of the international scene, a world structured by a global clash between two antagonistic forces. This representation was characteristic of American foreign policy throughout the twentieth century. In 1917, Woodrow Wilson took the view that the US did not share the preoccupations of France and Great Britain – the territorial concerns of colonial powers – and would enter the war with the sole aim of defending an ideal of freedom that was under threat from German tyranny. In 1942, Franklin Roosevelt cited the duty of America, as the land of freedom, to oppose fascism. In 1947, Harry Truman again invoked America's historic mission, its relentless pursuit of the enemies of freedom, which on this occasion took the form of totalitarianism. The 9/11 Commission report also made use of the twentieth century's grand geopolitical narrative – Freedom's struggle against its foes – although its tone lacked the missionary, indeed messianic, zeal of George Bush's pronouncements. Among its recommendations for defeating the new enemy, the report advocated ideological methods: "Just as we did in the Cold War, we need to defend our ideals abroad vigorously. America does stand up for its values" (p.377). The several references to the East-West conflict in a document produced by a bipartisan team of Democrats and Republicans illustrate the extent to which the thesis of a new bipolar war is embedded on the other side of the Atlantic. The configuration of the enemy may change from one conflict to another – a territorial state (the USSR) in the first instance and a transnational force (radical Islam) in the second – but the confrontation takes a similar form. In a widely publicised book³, the former White House adviser Richard Clarke claims that there are clear parallels between the war on terror and the Cold War: both scenarios are based on the opposition of two ideologies on a global scale and involve local conflicts and networks of secret agents. Moreover, it is likely that the narrow definition of the current adversary – Islamic terrorism – will evolve over time. The advantage of metaphors like 'war on terror' and Cold War (which was never formally identified as a 'war on communism') is that they justify the targeting of a wide variety of 'enemies'. For example, George W. Bush has already exploited this flexibility by classifying the attack on Iraq as part of the 'war on terror', thereby targeting a regime which, although despotic and brutal, was run on secular lines and had no links with the attacks of 11 September. The 'war on terror' also enabled John Kerry and Hillary Clinton to vote for the American offensive in Iraq. It is also clear that the polarisation implied in the

² *The 9/11 Commission Report*, Washington, July 2004.

³ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies*, New York, Free Press, 2004.

'war on terror' narrative could facilitate the confederation of scattered movements in North Africa, Southeast Asia and Central Asia; despite their diverse historical origins, they may discover common strategic interests. Identities on both sides of the new geopolitical divide are strengthening into two great blocs, although it should be noted that this can lead to some unexpected alliances. Thus the US government chose to regard the events in Breslan in 2004 as another episode in the war on terror, an interpretation that Vladimir Putin was quick to adopt, for it restricted any possibility of criticism or even investigation of Moscow's handling of the hostage crisis.

On 22 September 2004, President Musharraf of Pakistan addressed the UN General Assembly and expressed his concern over the increasing polarisation of international politics and the universal ostracism of Muslims: "Action has to be taken before an iron curtain finally descends between the West and the Islamic world." Many countries already adhere to the 'war on terror' scenario. But what of the others, the vast majority of African, Asian and European nations? If the 'war on terror' was to become the new interpretative framework for international politics, it is unlikely that poor countries would distance themselves from it and return to the concept of non-alignment. Even if they did so, it is doubtful whether they would be any more effective than they were during the Cold War. In the autumn of 2001, James Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, observed that the events of 11 September had revealed a new divide between North and South. In other words, the primary explanation for the escalation of terrorism stemmed from vast inequalities in global economic development. This interpretation may be shared by other international actors, but it clearly plays no determining role in the organisation of the global agenda. On 21 December 2001, George W. Bush declared that the authors of the terrorist attacks were the "heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century ... fascism, Nazism, totalitarianism." Given such a perspective, socio-economic considerations must necessarily take second place; as the threat is ideological it must be combated, immediately and inevitably, by force. Several European governments broadly adopted this point of view without subjecting it to any detailed analysis. In March 2004, Tony Blair repeated his belief that September 11 was "a declaration of war by religious fanatics who were prepared to wage that war without limit," and urged the West to be ready to take military action, as in Iraq, for appeasement would not work "in the face of this global threat". As we know, this was not the position taken by France, Germany and other European governments with regard to the Iraq war, nor did they incorporate it into a more general policy. These countries acknowledged the enormity and unique character of the 11 September terrorist attacks, but did not interpret them as a declaration of war comparable to Pearl Harbour, and therefore to the first act in a global conflict. The European Union did not formally commit itself to the 'war on terror'. In its commemorative declaration of 11 September 2002, the EU evoked the 'scourge of terrorism' and its determination to participate in the international community's 'fight' against it. There is a manifest difference here: the 'fight against the scourge of terrorism' is not the same as the 'war on terror' because the terms do not derive from the same world view – at least not for the present.

A European alternative?

The European Union has so far approached the problem of terrorism as one of the many transnational and global challenges that accompany the globalisation of trade. European governments cooperate, within the context of global governance, in the struggle against terrorism and other forms of organised crime such as drug trafficking and networks of illegal immigration. This approach, the only one that the EU has emphasised to date, conforms to the geopolitical narrative of globalisation, to the vision of a global community which assumes that the majority of member states will engage in negotiated action. Terms like 'globalisation' or 'global governance' have rarely appeared in American official discourse since 11 September; in fact, the 'war on terror' narrative belongs to a different category. Insofar as the EU approach has a practical utility, there is no reason to challenge it. But there is a danger that it could be obscured by a new geopolitical discourse which invests international terrorism with an exceptional status around which security issues could crystallise. A new, overarching political and economic agenda could then be installed, as is already the case in Great Britain. Europe, whose role on the international stage is the subject of intense debate, now stands at a crossroads. It can continue as the site of different and divergent discourses such as the one taking place at EU level – adherence to the globalisation narrative (a debate which is losing its momentum) – and those defended by the member states, all of whom have their own approach to the 'war on terror' thesis. It can also promote a greater synergy between national discourses. In the latter case, it remains to be seen on what foundation a common European world view would rest. We cannot exclude the possibility that the 'war on terror' will one day unite European nations just as the Cold War once contributed to the unity of Western Europe. However, it is also possible that, given the European Union's political maturity, Europeans could build on their own experience of regional cooperation, and thereby develop a different geopolitical narrative for the twenty-first century.

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