

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

THE WORLD'S TROUBLE SPOTS AND THE UNITED STATES

One of the themes of this program is that a new world order is emerging before our eyes. Few really pay much attention to this and few truly understand it. But the next US president will face some huge challenges for the 21st century. A few thoughts.

- First, an overview of one aspect of this new order—the demise of the traditional nation-state. Recently, columnist Tom Friedman argued that we are witnessing a major shift in the global balance of power. With the enormous increase in oil prices, we are observing a huge transfer of wealth to petro-authoritarian governments. This transfer is so enormous that OPEC, if it so desired, could purchase much of America's corporate structure in a manner of weeks. Few of these governments actually have geopolitical interests that resemble those of the US. In fact, many are actually hostile to US interests. Yet, we continue to buy their oil and give little consideration to conservation or to alternative sources of energy. Further, the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China) are moving up to America's level of economic clout and economic power. Fareed Zakaria writes: "Today, India has 18 all-news channels of its own. And the perspectives they provide are very different from those you will get in the Western media." They now have the confidence to present their own narrative, where they are at the center. The US has always dominated the world when it comes to research universities, its free market and the diversity of its human talent, but the BRIC nations are catching up. Zakaria writes again: "[Because these nations are now saving, working hard and thinking long term], they have adopted our lessons and are playing our game. [If we do not fix our political system and start thinking strategically about how to improve our competitiveness,] the US risks having its unique and advantageous position in the world erode as other countries rise." Finally, Friedman quotes David Rothkopf, who sees the influence of nation-states as waning, particularly in addressing global issues. Their lack of influence creates a power vacuum, which is being filled by a small group of players who Rothkopf calls the "superclass," a new global elite, who are much better suited to operating and influencing things on the global stage. He writes: [Some of these elite] "are from business and finance. Some are members of a kind of shadow elite—criminals and terrorists. Some are masters of new or traditional media; some are religious leaders, and a few are top officials of those governments that do have the ability to project their influence globally." The BRIC states and this new global elite place the US in an untenable position: "Call it a triple deficit. A fiscal deficit that will soon have us choosing between rationed health care, sufficient education, adequate infrastructure and traditional levels of defense spending, a trade deficit that has us borrowing from our rivals to the point of real vulnerability, and a geo-political deficit that is a legacy of Iraq, which may result in a hesitancy to take strong stands where we must."

- Second, these new realities in the global restructuring are evident in several developments over the last few weeks. There is evidence that America is drawing inward and American power is uncertain and questionable. As the US waits to see who its next president will be, the world cannot wait. Local power structures are making decisions without the US and these decisions could have profound effects for the long term. Consider the following:
 1. The recent deal between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government. The US had nothing to do with it. The agreement was brokered by Arab mediators in Doha, Qatar, and involved extensive last-minute diplomacy among major regional players in Lebanon, including Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is little question that this deal strongly favors Hezbollah. The deal to form a new Lebanese government promises to end the 18 months of political deadlock and it underscores the rising power of Iran and Syria, both of which have backed Hezbollah. However, the deal leaves unresolved the issues that originally provoked the crisis in December 2006, namely Hezbollah's weapons and Lebanon's relations with Syria, which ended its 29-year military presence in Lebanon in 2005 after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The agreement provides for a new unity government of 16 cabinet seats for the governing majority, 11 for the opposition and 3 to be nominated by the new president, the army chief, Gen. Michel Suleiman. The deal will now permit the opposition to veto cabinet decisions, which in effect means Hezbollah. The deal also paves the way for a new electoral law that, if approved, will divide up Lebanon into new, smaller electoral districts, in an effort to better reflect the various sects of Lebanon. When, at the encouragement of the US and Saudi Arabia, the present government of Lebanon challenged Hezbollah's private telecommunications network and its control over the Beirut airport, Hezbollah's leader, Sheik Nasrallah, declared these decisions an act of war. He sent his forces and allies into the streets. That threat of continued open civil war led to this agreement. Hezbollah threatened extensive violence and got its way—an opportunity to extend its influence within the Lebanese government. [Amazingly, Hezbollah had been building a communications network stretching for more than 200 miles—in a nation only 140 miles long. This network involved fiber-optic cable and had the effect of wireless transmitters and redundancies so that even in war time, communications would continue. This work was done with the “participation in the field” [the government reported] of the Iranian Headquarters for the Reconstruction of Lebanon, an Iranian agency that has claimed credit for hundreds of rebuilding projects since the 2006 war.] As Cam Simpson has reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, “Hezbollah sees itself not only as a defender of Lebanon but as a vital link in the Iranian and Syrian alliance against the US in the broader Middle East region.” Therefore, this agreement does seem to be a rebuke of US diplomatic efforts in the region to marginalize Syria and Iran, the major supporters of Hezbollah. There is little doubt that this agreement is a huge victory for Hezbollah—one one that spells serious challenges for Israel. Hezbollah has made it clear that it will never recognize Israel's existence and will be a major threat to Israel on its northern border. As Andrew Lee Butters of *Time* has argued, “Unlike Hamas, which is confined to poverty-stricken Gaza, Hezbollah has at its disposal an entire country, complete with a sophisticated banking system, an international airport and a friendly neighbor in Syria. Never has a terrorist organization had that kind of infrastructure.”

2. The negotiations between Israel and Syria. It was revealed last week that, with the aid of Turkey as a mediator, Syria and Israel are conducting indirect peace talks. Apparently, this dialogue began early last year. Obviously, any negotiations must involve Israel withdrawing from the Golan Heights, which Israel seized during the 1967 war. [In fact, Israel had annexed the Golan Heights, because before 1967, Syria had daily bombarded northern Israel with artillery, making life in the north virtually impossible.] Turkey is a logical broker of such a deal because it sees itself as a major player in regional peacemaking and has been Israel's main Muslim ally since the nations agreed to a military-cooperation pact in 1996. Are these serious negotiations? Because they are not direct negotiations, it is difficult to judge their meaning. Further, Syria is a strong supporter of the two militant terrorist groups—Hezbollah and Hamas—that pose the greatest present threat to Israel. Because Syria is classified by the US as a state sponsor of terrorism, it is unusual that Israel would engage in such negotiations without the support of the US. But Israel and the US have disagreed over how to approach Syria. Twice before, under Prime Ministers Yitzak Rabin and Ehud Barak, similar efforts to sign a deal with Syria failed. But this time, there are extenuating circumstances: Ehud Olmert is politically weak, with a thin parliamentary majority, rather dependent on the right-wing religious Shas party. He also is facing a criminal investigation. Both of these realities make any deal questionable. Despite the strong reservations of the US, Israel could be trying to pull Syria away from the orbit of Iran and return it to a more pro-Western world of Egypt, Jordan and to some extent Saudi Arabia. Because Syria provides Hezbollah with rockets and arms, trying to end that kind of support would be an obvious item on the table in such negotiations. But the reality is it is very difficult seeing Israel returning the Golan Heights to Syria. Security issues as well as access to the waterline of the Sea of Galilee are at stake as well. Israel would not want to lose that access which it has enjoyed since 1967. But that Israel has even been indirectly talking with Syria means it is defying the US position. For the Bush administration, such negotiations would appear to reward Syria at a time when the US is seeking to isolate it for its meddling in Lebanon and its backing of Hezbollah. Israel has not listened to the US!

See Jim Hoagland in the *Washington Post* (25 May 2008); Tom Friedman in the *New York Times* (21 May 2008); Cam Simpson on Lebanon in the *Wall Street Journal* (22 May 2008); Robert Worth and Nada Bakri in the *New York Times* (22 May 2008); Helene Cooper in the *New York Times* (22 May 2008); Andrew Lee Butters in *Time* (26 May 2008), p. 31; and Cam Simpson on Syria-Israeli negotiations in the *Wall Street Journal* (22 May 2008).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

MYANMAR AND THE UN

The horrific cyclone disaster in Myanmar (formerly Burma) is a tragedy and an appalling demonstration of a government that is more concerned about its image and its position than its citizens. Few would doubt that the generals who run Myanmar are inept rulers who again care more about their own position and power than anything else. As a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* has pointed out, the situation in Myanmar is a test of a new United Nations doctrine. In 2005, the UN established a new legal doctrine called the “responsibility to protect”

in dealing with a nation that demonstrates disregard for its citizens. This doctrine was implemented in response to the failures of the world community to address the genocide associated with the slaughter in Rwanda. The legal ramifications of this new doctrine are that it authorizes the UN to intervene to prevent crimes against humanity. Are the generals of Myanmar guilty of blocking life-saving aid to its people? If so, then the doctrine of “responsibility to protect” applies. The challenge is that of course this new doctrine is untested. Further, many nations (e.g., China, Russia, South Africa, Libya, etc.) all oppose the use of this new doctrine. They all cite procedural reasons for opposing any discussion at the Security Council level.

Why is this new doctrine so controversial? This UN agreement, which is the basis for the new doctrine, overturns the centuries-old idea of national sovereignty. It has been adopted by the Security Council and by the General Assembly, but its advocates are reluctant to test that support within both bodies. There are therefore no guidelines for when the Security Council should authorize action or the form such actions should take. The brutal reality remains—few nations are willing to set precedents on these new limits of national sovereignty. Obviously, few want to assume a greater level of international responsibility. But perhaps more importantly, the action based on this new doctrine could be used against them. There is little doubt that China is most concerned about such a development. Finally, most nations seem to agree that this new doctrine of the UN does not apply to developments due to natural disasters, such as a cyclone.

But for one moment, let us imagine an armed humanitarian intervention in Myanmar to help the at least 1.5 million Burmese people that are homeless or in desperate need of assistance due to the cyclone. It could be done and would probably meet with little resistance. Would the Burmese army fight this humanitarian mission? If they did, could this mean the end to the military junta, for it could ultimately lead to the junta’s collapse? If that were to occur, the UN (and therefore the US) would need to accept significant responsibility for the collapse of the regime. About 1/3 of the 47 million that inhabit Myanmar are ethnic minorities, and they have not gotten along. If the junta collapsed, the real issue would not be about forging a democracy, but forging a compromise between the majority Burmese people and the other ethnic groups. Could Myanmar develop into another nation where ethnic cleansing would develop? It seems so simple: Help those devastated by this terrible cyclone. But to do so, with any kind of force, could have ramifications considerably greater than the humanitarian aid issue. If this whole matter is not handled wisely, we could see another example of the carnage that faced the Balkans after the collapse of Yugoslavia and communism in the 1990s. Or we could see another ethnic/tribal rivalry like we see in Iraq since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. As with so many issues related to the human condition, solving one problem can actually create another set of even more serious problems. The generals of Myanmar are acting irresponsibly and are, in my judgment, guilty of crimes against humanity. There is little excuse for their self-serving actions. But any threat of military force or even implementing this “new doctrine” of the UN could have unintended consequences with which the world community is not prepared to deal. Oh, the horrors of living in a fallen world!

See Louise Radnofsky in the *Wall Street Journal* (14 May 2008) and Robert D. Kaplan in the *New York Times* (14 May 2008).