Is the War on Terror Transforming Contemporary Politics?

The War on Terror has changed the world of international politics greatly. Old traditions and customs such as the respect for state sovereignty and the formal equality of states have been shaken. Humanitarian intervention and concerns for human security have been forced into the background, and the human rights and liberty of citizens of all nations are being threatened by the War on Terror.

This essay will evaluate the extent to which the War on Terror, started by the US in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, is changing contemporary politics, and how. It will briefly look at the situation before the War on Terror began, and will then examine the ways in which the War on Terror has influenced the freedoms of citizens and how liberty has been affected by the desire for security and protection. The changes to the international community that have occurred and the damage that has been done to the stability of the system will be examined. The changes in priorities and objectives on an international level will be analysed with the change from intervention for humanitarianism to intervention for security. The essay will then move on to the probable future consequences of the war and will then take a look at how the War on Terror may continue to shape politics.

At the end of the Cold War, the United States of America was left as the single most powerful nation in the world. The victory of capitalism over communism had resulted in a dramatic shift from realism as the dominant theory in international relations, to liberalism. Realism had failed to anticipate the end of the Cold War, and had instead predicted a continual balance of power between the USSR and the USA. Liberal academics such as Francis Fukuyama heralded an 'end of history'[1], a new world in which liberal democracy, having been proved to be the most effective system of government, will spread across the globe and will result in a peaceful, united world. Liberals believe that democracy has a unique trait in that it is an inherently peaceful system, as there is yet to be a war between liberal democratic nations. They argue that this is because liberal democracies form links between each other, initially through trade alliances and economic interdependence. They predicted that states themselves will become more interdependent and unified because democracies are ruled by the individual citizens within them, who are much more likely to want to benefit from trading with another nation rather than declaring war against them.[2] And in the post-Cold War world, this seemed to be occurring.

Liberals in the post-Cold War period pointed to international organisations such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the World Trade Organisation, Interpol, and of course the United Nations, as well as many other organisations, as symbols of the ability of states to cooperate and work together for mutual gain. They envisaged an international system of collaboration and union.

Ever since the 1600s the international community has adhered to the principles of Westphalian Sovereignty. In this view sovereignty is the right of all governments to rule their nations as they see fit, free of external challenge (although they were never granted the right to abuse their citizens).[3] The Westphalian tradition saw that international order and stability were of great importance, but to achieve this states had to respect one another's right to govern. In the 20th century however, Westphalian sovereignty began to be challenged by the growing concern that states are not always able or willing to protect their citizens' human rights. Indeed, in the 20th century alone 262 million people were killed by their own governments: six times more than the number of people killed in battle with

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foreign governments[4].

After the Cold War, Humanitarianism became a very powerful force, which resulted in numerous interventions. The humanitarian failures in Rwanda and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia prompted international organisations and politicians to re-evaluate the meaning of sovereignty and the responsibility for states to intervene in the governing of other nations when human rights and human security is threatened.[5] The humanitarian movement of the 1990s started to crack the norms of non-intervention and traditional views of sovereignty, which the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror have shattered.

The events on September 11th 2001 had a great impact on nations all over the globe. It shook the core assumptions that had shaped international politics, and demonstrated that in the modern world threats to security are present on all levels, not only from states, but from individuals from anywhere in the world. 9/11 made it obvious how interconnected the world had become, and how no nation can cut itself off from the rest of the world. It showed how space and territory were no longer boundaries which protected states, as dangers can come from anywhere. It can also be seen that 9/11 showed that the military strength, size of a nation's high tech arsenal, and geostrategic power provides little protection from the new globalised terrorists, who were able to cause such chaos using only parcel knives to seize control of an aeroplane.[6] [7]

In America the terrorist attacks sparked a great amount of shock, fear, sadness, and also hatred. In the eyes of the West, the world had become divided into good and evil, and a vast series of new threats and dangers came into focus. Although terrorism was nothing new at the time, there had never been a terrorist attack which had received such media attention.[8] The US reacted to the attacks with the declaration of a 'war on terror' to eliminate the terrorist networks which had grown around the world. It was widely recognised that terrorist networks tended to thrive in failed, rogue or unstable states, and so these states became the focus of intervention.[9]

The interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 were not humanitarian however. Certainly, the US did intend to remove two ruthless regimes that had butchered and oppressed their people. The invasion of Afghanistan was also argued by Donald Rumsfeld as being in line with previous interventions in Kosovo, Bosnia, Somalia, Northern Iraq and Kuwait 'for the purpose of denying hostile regimes the opportunity to oppress their own people and other people.'[10]

The key difference between the invasions in the War on Terror and previous humanitarian interventions are, as Paul Heinbecker the Canadian Ambassador to the UN described, the interventions in Kosovo and East Timor were based on concern for the vulnerable 'other, whereas Afghanistan and Iraq were fought for the protection of the 'self'.[11] Indeed, before the invasion of Iraq the crisis was described with little focus on the suffering of civilians within Iraq, but on the threat that the nation posed to other nations. It was only after support for the war diminished and the weakness of the links between Al Qaida and Saddam Hussein was exposed that humanitarian arguments were used for justification. [12] However, it can be argued that the threat of terrorism is actually rather minor when compared to other threats to human security around the world. Poverty and underdevelopment and the problems they cause, as well as natural disasters, wars, crime, and even car accidents are arguably greater threats to survival. Indeed, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 killed nearly three thousand people in one day, whereas at least as many children die every day of avoidable intestinal diseases such as dysentery and diarrhoea caused mainly by impure water, and in late 2006 there were a similar number of people dying every month in the insurgency and sectarian violence in Iraq.[13] Interventions are now no longer about saving the lives of citizens of other nations, and are now all about security.

The War on Terror has caused severe damage to the concept of state sovereignty and has set a very dangerous precedent for arguments of legitimate intervention. This damage to sovereignty could well lead to the lowering of legal, psychological, and political barriers to the use of force against other nations for all manner of purposes. This might have initiated a 'frame shattering, norm changing process' which will reduce them further.[14] An example of this is in Russia's decision to invade Georgia, to which Vladimir Putin compared the US invasion of Iraq:

"They [the Americans] of course had to hang Saddam Hussein for destroying several Shia villages. But the current Georgian rulers who in one hour simply wiped 10 Ossetian villages from the face of the earth, the Georgian rulers

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which used tanks to run over children and the elderly, which threw civilians into cellars and burnt them – they [Georgian leaders] are players that have to be protected."[15]

The perceived threat of terrorism has provided impetus for pre-emptive intervention against states that show the symptoms of one which may become a breeding ground for terrorists; this has meant that the target of the War on Terror is not limited to terrorist networks, but states which are perceived as having the conditions which may spread terrorism, and it has enabled the US to invade before the target state has, or imminently will, attack.[16] This presents a very serious challenge to the principles of sovereignty, as it gives states the justification to change, interfere and intervene in how a state is governed. This has the potential of eroding the normative framework of the use of force enshrined in the UN Charter and shakes international law and the core principles of the UN, both in its defiance of the traditional views toward sovereignty and the challenging of the boundaries of the legitimate use of force.[17] Speaking in 1956 US Secretary of State John Foster argued that 'The violent armed attack by three members of the United nations upon a fourth cannot be treated as anything but a grave error inconsistent with the principles and purposes of the Charter'[18] however this is a growing occurrence in the War on Terror.

The War on Terror has also treated states unequally, which is undermining the formal equality of states protected in the UN Charter. The Bush doctrine has granted some states (such as France, Israel and India the right to provide for their defence as they see fit, but not others (such as Iran etc).[19] The war has also strained relationships between the US and the other members of the coalition that invaded Iraq, and many other members of the UN including allies such as France and Germany. This strain, combined with the damages to the principles of the United Nations could cause a fracturing of the international community.

The effects of the War on Terror are not limited to the realm of states however. The internal politics of the states fighting the war have also changed. Before 9/11 the surveillance and biometric industry was steadily growing, but growth was restricted by concerns for liberty and privacy. However, since the start of the War on Terror, security and surveillance technology has seen a massive surge in usage. Zureik showed that within weeks of the attack on the World Trade Centre, the US Congress introduced seventeen new bills with measures to increase border security and impose stricter regulations on migration and travel.[20] Many countries have seen similar increases in surveillance of their own citizens, particularly the UK, which may now have more CCTV cameras per capita than anywhere else, and over 4.8 million cameras in operation.[21]

The War on Terror has encouraged states to police their borders far more cautiously with a myriad of security checks needed in travelling between nations and far stricter regulations on who is allowed to travel. The movements of people anywhere is now very closely watched, and the government now has the power to locate and track the behaviour of virtually anyone through the use of technologies such as CCTV, border control, GPS, bank transactions, and even mobile phones can be used by the state to locate and trace members of the public. On top of this, the content of phone calls and e-mails can be monitored and used by intelligence agencies. The War on Terror has sparked numerous policies to be undertaken and legislations enforced which would have never previously been even considered due to the threat that they pose to human rights. One example is the US PATRIOT Act, which enables security services to search a suspect's home or place of work, record conversations, and monitor phone lines, emails and financial records without the knowledge or permission of the individual concerned or a court order. Another is the torture and rendition of people in Guantanamo Prison and other such places as well as the imprisonment of well over 100,000 people without trial.[22] There have been similar actions taken in the UK also, such as new legislation giving security forces much greater powers to detain and interrogate terrorism suspects.[23] There have even been allegations made recently that the UK has had knowledge of, and assisted the torture of British citizens and terrorism suspects in overseas prisons.[24]

This authoritarian approach to security is a worrying trend which has compromised liberty and human rights around the world, especially those of foreign nationals and refugees, who are now not only discriminated against and blamed for scrounging welfare and stealing jobs, but are also accused of playing a role in the globalised terrorist network. The War on Terror has lead to migrants being subjected to racism and distrust, as well as deprivation of their human rights. They can now be detained on charges which they cannot defend against as they are not always told what they are accused of having done[25]. These changes show a broad shift of Western societies to becoming 'control states',

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nations in which individuals are tightly regulated and controlled by the state and other institutions in all areas of life. The movement and behaviour of citizens has become restricted and people are constantly surveilled.[26]

It can be argued that the War on Terror may not actually have a weakening effect on the state as an entity despite the damage that it has done to sovereignty in many cases. Indeed, the War on Terror may have actually made the state stronger. The concept of pharmacotic war is the idea that war can have a 'healing' effect on a nation that can remove internal disorder, restore authority and legitimacy of government, and create union and consensus among a nation's people. Larry George argues that this is the case in the War on Terror. But pharmacotic war is far from a good thing, it requires the identification of an enemy, usually a scapegoat on whom the troubles of the state can be pinned. This practice was used in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, apartheid Africa, the 1970s military dictatorships of Chile and Argentina, and now in the nations fighting the War on Terror.[27]

The War on Terror mirrors the model of previous pharmacotic wars, with a political crisis facing the community in which a violent, 'symbolically resonant violation' occurs. Examples of this are the Boston massacre, Fort Sumter, Lusitania, Pearl Harbour, and Tonkin Gulf scenarios in which innocent lives are lost and others are endangered. This leads to the identification and demonization of an external enemy leading to a punitive military response against the perceived threat[28]. The effect of this on contemporary politics is the depoliticisation of issues and actions which are viewed as being necessary for the safety and survival of the state. The War on Terror has granted the Bush Administration the support of the US citizens and much of the international community to police the oil fields and pipelines in Central Asia, provide security for a pipeline from the Caspian Sea to the Arabian Sea, to become militarily involved in the civil war in Georgia and Uzbekistan, to support Moscow's repression of the Chechen rebellion and Israel's actions in the West Bank, to support the Philippine government's conflict with Islamist rebels, to support the undemocratic Saudi royal family, it has transformed the counternarcotics program in Colombia into an element of the War on Terror, to adopt an aggressive foreign policy toward North Korea and Iran, and, of course, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.[29]

The War on Terror has clearly had a considerable effect on international and domestic politics. Whether or not the changes thus far experienced will gather momentum and lead to the complete breakdown of international community and law and order, however, remains to be seen. Although the US has succeeded in going against the will of the UN (and breaching international law) it is questionable whether it will be able to continue to do so for much longer. With the US' status as the global hegemon in the international system being gradually lost due to its failures in dealing with terrorism, it may have to become more careful with its power and try to appease the rest of the United Nations. Indeed, the Obama administration is much less eager to follow the precedence set by the Bush doctrine, and even the use of the term 'war on terror' is falling into disuse.

However, the precedence that the War on Terror has set for the rest of the world may continue to change international politics. The excuse of counter-terrorism in establishing authoritarian policies and in intervening other nations is a popular, and evidently effective one, and the damage to state sovereignty, international law and may see breakdown of the United Nations and the international community. So the War on Terror may have begun to wind to a close, but the effects of it may continue to change the world dramatically.

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