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# The Impact of Neoconservative Think Tanks on American Foreign Policy

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KUBILAY YADO ARIN, MAY 26 2014

After recruiting their staff from the most renowned think tanks, the Clinton and Bush administrations succeeded in influencing the public opinion in the US. In this regard, policy advisers from think tanks are not merely viewed as objective scholars who give neutral recommendations to the government, but as policy entrepreneurs who are associated with power blocs, foundations, corporations, and partisan politics. Did the neoconservative Project for a New American Century form an alliance with the Bush Administration?

In the article, the success of the neoconservative think tanks as an advocacy coalition is discussed. For the conservative turn, the alliance of the Christian Right and the neoconservative intellectuals in think tanks (Heritage Foundation and AEI) with the financial elite did not only move the Republican Party to the right, but also tried to manipulate public opinion under the influence of sympathizing media tycoons like Rupert Murdoch (Müller 43-44). Neoconservative papers like the *National Journal*, the *Public Interest*, and the *American Spectator* influence the op-eds of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Times*. Liberal think tanks and their contacts in Congress should be expelled from the government apparatus by losing their donors with the result that the neocons could gain access to the state institutions and leave an imprint on the Clinton administration before the next election (Krugman 182-184).

### The Bush Administration

Vice-President Cheney was the key player in the appointment of leading neoconservatives like Abrams, Armitage, Bolton, Wolfowitz, and Perle. Dorrien characterizes Cheney as policy entrepreneur who was highly amenable for neoconservative proposals. Neither Dick Cheney nor Donald Rumsfeld had a neoconservative tenure. Rather, both represented traditional Republican hawks who were receptive to neoconservative views. So both of them had signed the founding charter of the Project for a New American Century. Cheney and Rumsfeld shared its unipolarism and thus were aligned with the neoconservative movement (Dorrien, *Imperial Designs* 3). Hardline conservatives like Cheney and Rumsfeld would never agree with the balance of power or follow Buchanan in an old-fashioned isolationism. President George W. Bush may be close to the Christian Right and Vice-President Dick Cheney may be considered a fiscal conservative. These two factions rival with the neoconservatives for ideological predominance in the GOP, but both factions are in concord with them in the unilateral foreign policy for the adherence of national interests, increased defense spending, and going it alone.

Though Donald Rumsfeld was no neoconservative, he was closely connected to Paul Wolfowitz, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Richard Perle. Indeed, he was a go-between among the neoconservatives, the corporations, and politicians; he partly orchestrated the support of multinationals and arms producers to the neoconservative movement. Big business became the profiteer of neoconservative ideas that legitimized their interests (Velasco 73). Rumsfeld nominated neocons such as Wolfowitz and Feith to senior positions in the DoD (Ibid. 207). The office of the Vice-President, the Pentagon, and the Defense Policy Board were neoconservative strongholds (Dorrien, *Imperial Designs* 2).

According to Peleg, the assertive hawks Cheney and Rumsfeld influenced George W. Bush's decisions on foreign policy. In the case of Bush, one can assess that he had the same opinion on neoconservative thinking. In all

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probability, the President made a decision after consulting his Vice President, while both were increasingly affected by neoconservatives who were incorporated in the Defense and State Departments (Peleg 165). While Bush's speeches often included religious terms, he always stressed his resolve to unilaterally enhance American power. The resolute stance of Bush Jr. was the broadening of his Christian faith based on neoconservatism. The neocons gave him assurance that his failing policies were right, despite the loss of public opinion. In conveying his policies to the electorate, Bush used the neoconservative argumentation that his promotion of liberty and democracy were identical with American interests (Skidmore 209).

## **The Bush Doctrine, the Neoconservative Concept for Primacy?**

In the enforcement of the Pax Americana, neocons were willing to approve tensions in diplomacy and international law: not the entire UN, but its perception as fundament of the 'new world order' would fall. From their perspective, this was a liberal illusion that the UN Security Council could exclusively legitimize the use of force or guarantee peace through international law in cooperation with other organizations (Halper and Clarke 40-47). Moreover, neocons feared that the international institutions might be misused in an absolutely legal and administrative framework to constrain American power by a sovereign world government that strictly followed international law. By implication, neocons are regarded as architects of an interventionist unilateralism because of their endorsement of military conflict settlement.

Neoconservative think tanks like the AEI and the PNAC, whose members included Cheney, Rumsfeld, Perle and Wolfowitz, not only demanded a significant rise in defense spending, but also the challenging of regimes that were hostile to American values and interests (Homolar-Riechmann 34-35). "Wolfowitz began drafting the doctrine of pre-emptive attack and unilateralism in 1992" (Coffmann 5). As former member of the Bush Sr. administration, Wolfowitz formulated, in his time at the AEI and later at the PNAC, which he co-founded, the Bush Doctrine formerly known as the Wolfowitz Doctrine.

The unilateral war strategy of the AEI and the PNAC was set against the multilateral US foreign policy that had built the United Nations and NATO. The Bush administration proceeded unilaterally against other states for the preservation of the US national interest in security. While multilateral cooperation under US hegemony was widely desirable, unilateralism provoked counterweight among France, Germany, Russia, and China, or the group of states, the G-77 (Jäger 838).

The neoconservatives saw the occupation of Iraq as first phase in the reordering of the Near East. "By 1997 the neoconservative think-tank the New American Century Project advocated a remaking of the Middle East" (Coffman 5). In its analysis, the Iraq war should secure democracy in the world. Iraq should become the first democratic state in the Arab world and induce its neighbours to emulate its progress. Islamism would lose ground, since economic prosperity and democratic freedom were contagious. America's military presence would have, according to neocons, a sobering effect on the authoritarian regimes in the region. The neocons, however, primarily made the same observations, like all proponents of earlier foreign policy doctrines, about the frailness of their abstract theories to real events. The Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya proved the veracity of their assumptions after years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and months-long air attacks to oust Gaddafi from power, according to the neoconservative Hoover Institution (Lagon and Shultz).

## **Conclusion**

Following Sabatier's and Jenkins-Smith's explanatory approach, the advocacy coalition neoconservatives have used their network of scholars, journalists, managers, bureaucrats, and politicians to convince the foreign policy novice George W. Bush of their plans for the reordering of the Near East (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 3). Since the foundation of the PNAC in 1997, the scholars exchanged views with the Republican members of Congress in testimonies. Even before the election of Bush Jr., they could convey their unilateral stance not only to Republicans, but also to the Clinton administration, though they did not ultimately succeed under Clinton. Not until Bush Jr. came into office were the neoconservatives able, under the leadership of their proponents Rumsfeld and Cheney, to implement their unilateral pursuit of US primacy, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the proclamation of the

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Bush Doctrine. Once in government, they isolated dissenters like Colin Powell in the decision-making. As former think-tank scholars, they provided Bush Jr. with analyses, ideology, and knowledge for his plans to topple Saddam Hussein. There existed a coalition of interest and knowledge between the former scholars and their employer in the White House, causing a learning effect and the socialization of neoconservative ideas over group boundaries into the entire state apparatus and to the GOP, resulting in a policy change. As a consequence a symbiosis of knowledge and power, neoconservatives were linked to the Bush administration and the Republican Congress.

The changes in international politics led to a recalibration of the US role as hegemon in a multipolar system to primacy in a unipolar system, which resulted in an alignment of the decision-making process in foreign policy. So the USA succumbed to the temptation to maintain and enhance, by military means, its position as hegemonic power in the world economy. By conducting the war on terror, the political elites pursued their goal of universal dominion under Bush Jr. After the dismissal of key neoconservatives from the Bush administration, the unilateral foreign policy was altered. The alliance between the neoconservative PNAC and the administration ended after the loss of majority in Congress in 2006, whereupon leading neoconservatives like Rumsfeld, Perle, and Wolfowitz resigned and their think tank PNAC was closed (Reynolds).

The new foreign policy should secure the military and economic strength after the loss of the 'unipolar moment' (Charles Krauthammer) for shaping a global consensus and mutual agreement with the allies to face global challenges under US leadership (Nye, *Future of Soft Power* 10). Even liberal internationalists contended: multilateralism when possible, going it alone when necessary (Maull 11).[1] In this sense, Nye points to 'smart power' that combines strategies of hard and soft power for providing US foreign policy the diplomatic legitimacy of military interventions through the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the development of civic society. The war on terror had lessened the 'smart power' of the US and, after 9/11, brought an 'overmilitarised' foreign policy with deep cuts in foreign aid and the budget of the State Department (Nye, *Future of Soft Power* 9-11). This is related to the impact of neoconservative think tanks AEI and PNAC, which, as sectional interest groups, defined expansive foreign policy goals at cost of broadly conceived national interests. As a result, the assertive multilateralism of the Clinton administration shifted to unilateral primacy under Bush Jr.

The neocons still represent the strongest foreign policy faction in the GOP. They are allied with the Christian Right, which is lacking its own foreign policy strategy. The neocons are rooted in the Pentagon and the arms industry. Their network in think tanks, government agencies, economy, and media such as Fox News will not diminish in the coming years. In 2009, some of the same people started the Foreign Policy Initiative. Many of Romney's key advisers have been drawn from this network and are credited by him with influencing his outlook (Judis). Out of Romney's 24 foreign policy advisers, 17 had worked for the Bush administration. As his advisers, the neocons formulated Romney's uncompromising stance towards Russia, China, Iran, and the stalled Mideast peace process. Once again, the right-wing intellectuals made the headlines with their impact on American foreign policy (Berman; Horowitz; Heilbrunn).

## Notes

[1] In that regard, Maull quotes Joseph S. Nye, one of the most influential representatives of this school of thought. Hanns W Maull.: "The Quest for Effective Multilateralism and the Future of Transatlantic Relations" *Foreign Policy in Dialogue*, Vol 8, Issue 25, 9–18.

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