

Curbing the Pentagon

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The Bush administrations, as Maarten van Rossum has remarked, will go down as having demonstrated the failure of both political unilateralism and economic Neoliberalism for US domestic and foreign policy. It is clear that the new Obama administration will quickly establish itself as pragmatic and unwilling to view all issues through the same ideologically-tinted glasses. But aside from this clear change in perspective from the Oval Office, there is another serious matter at the heart of the US government which will potentially continue to define the capabilities of the next administration. This is the fact that during the Bush years the Pentagon has achieved an overwhelming position of dominance at the expense of all other civilian departments. As a result the impact of the military on US foreign policy is set to continue.

According to the recently released report *A Unified Security Budget for the United States: FY 2009*, compiled by a non-partisan group of experts on security affairs, the ratio of funding for military forces versus that for non-military international engagement is likely to be 18:1 in 2009 (up from 16:1 in 2008). In a final statement of intent, the outgoing Bush administration has secured a \$40 billion increase in the Pentagon's budget for next year, a figure that is higher than the total budget for the State Department itself. This all the more striking if one considers that the \$15 billion a month currently being spent on military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan comes from separate supplementary funding granted by Congress. At present, for every dollar spent on diplomacy, \$16 dollars are spent on military programmes. The cost of a single proposed weapons system, the Virginia-class submarine (\$850 million), is more than the amount the US owes to the United Nations in unpaid contributions. And this in a time when there is a desperate need to improve the image of the United States abroad by shifting the emphasis away from offensive military strategies.

It is clear why the Pentagon has achieved such a dominant position. The declaration of a War on Terror following 9/11 placed the military establishment in the driving seat to respond to the threat posed to the United States. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was supposed to lead the way to the redrawing of Middle East politics, with Tehran and Damascus on the list as likely venues for further regime change. Instead administrative incompetence and a determined insurgency stopped the US military in its tracks and prevented any coherent transition of power in Iraq for five years. Meanwhile the Taliban, a far more worthy target in relation to anti-terrorism, were given all the time to regroup and reassert themselves in Afghanistan and North-West Pakistan. The belief in high-tech military solutions for political problems has led to the insistence on placing an 'anti-missile shield' in Poland and the Czech Republic *before* it has been declared reliable for service. This has caused no end of trouble with Russia, a relation that has already been put under strain over the last decade by the apparently unending drive to expand NATO eastwards. Voices of concern over the practicalities of the anti-missile system have already been heard from parts of the Pentagon, but it remains to be seen whether this will have any effect on its funding status or eventual deployment under the new administration.

When referring to the dominance of the Pentagon, it is not just a matter of weaponry or the questionable deployment of US marines. Looking to develop its role in the field of 'strategic

influence', the military has also greatly expanded its activities in communications and media, with questionable consequences. Under Donald Rumsfeld the Office of Strategic Influence and the Information Operations Task Force, both within the Pentagon, deliberately planted positive news stories about Iraq that would be picked up by the US media, thereby increasing domestic support for foreign military operations. Private companies such as the Rendon Group and the Lincoln Group were hired with million-dollar contracts to manage Pentagon public relations and ensure a positive press.

But this is about more than just propaganda. Areas previously reserved for the State Department and related agencies, in particular public diplomacy, have increasingly been drawn within the military's responsibility. In November 2007 Robert Gates, the successor to Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense, declared that the civilian tools of government needed to be upgraded so that the US could once again explain clearly to the world "what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and our goals." Gates has already been confirmed to stay on as Secretary under Obama, and he has continued to oversee his Department's outreach into new administrative territory. In December 2006 Gates appointed Michael Doran as the first Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Support to Public Diplomacy, with the task of upgrading the Department's contribution to US information programmes. Significantly, in September 2008 the White House nominated Doran for the position of Assistant Secretary of State for International Information Programs in the State Department. As a Pentagon spokesperson said during the summer, the civilian side of government operates according to "an outdated model of global communication." Not for nothing does the recent report 'A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future' from the American Academy of Diplomacy refer to the "militarization of diplomacy". The consistent under-funding of the State Department has led to a desperate shortage of trained embassy personnel, especially in languages, and a serious lack of morale. Meanwhile under Bush the military establishment has taken a leading role in US diplomatic, public diplomacy, and assistance tasks across North Africa, the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and the Far East. In many regions the Pentagon is at the forefront in engaging with foreign public opinion, even though this remains, officially, the job of the State Department. During 2008 the military's lead in developing a 'whole of government' approach to stability and security issues around the world will probably only increase the subordination of other departments to the Pentagon's agenda.

Of course, two factors need to be taken into account here: the ongoing effects of the credit crisis, and Hilary Clinton. Regarding the former, earlier this year Obama stated his intention to more than double the US international aid budget to \$50 billion, but this is unlikely to survive the strain on federal reserves caused by the \$700 billion bail-out plan, higher unemployment, and declining tax revenues. Opinion is divided on how this crisis will have an impact on the still-rising military budget. Domestic politics will always play a role here, due to the vast array of jobs in the US economy that are connected to defence contractors, spread out across almost every state. Obama will be looking to expand his political base over the next two years, considering he received only 52% of the popular vote, and the domestic political risks of reducing the Pentagon's budget and appearing to run down US defences are potentially huge. Regarding Hilary Clinton, while her diplomatic skills will certainly be in demand overseas, perhaps her most important role will be to fight to reclaim administrative responsibility for the State Department, something which she has the capability to do well. Combining these two factors together, the possibilities for improving the US standing in the world are equally great. As the respected Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, Thomas Fingar, stated in September, US military power will for now be "the least significant"

asset in maintaining and extending US influence abroad. Curbing the Pentagon could be Obama's biggest challenge. One can hope that a cut-back in the military budget, accompanied by a regeneration of the State Department and a large-scale investment in diplomatic resources under Clinton, will be the best possible outcome from 2008's financial turmoil.