

A Foreign Policy Debacle: Reading Mr. Frum's Defense of the G. W. Bush Administration

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In his contribution for the September/October 2008 issue of *Foreign Policy*, former Bush speechwriter David Frum, who has been recognized as having helped coin the notion of an “axis of evil”, and is currently a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, offers a baffling review of George W. Bush’s legacy in foreign affairs, which purports to explain why we will “miss” the President after the end of his term.

While conceding that the war in Iraq has defined Bush’s presidency, Frum appears sanguine about that country’s future stability. He contends that its “neighbors will be bruised but their geopolitical policies will stay intact.” Frum also credits this administration with strategic insight. According to him, it was judicious to have planned for a nuclear agreement with India, and to have offered it a defense package that could total up to \$100 billion in the next ten years. Wise also the decision to have initiated joint naval exercises with India, Australia, Japan and Singapore. He mentions the “continued successful management” of relations with China, and the “wise decision to leave President Chávez enough rope to hang himself.” Other accomplishments, according to Frum, include the signing of the world’s first convention on cybercrime. And finally, he attributes our current safety – that is the lack of any major attack since 9/11, to current policies.

On geopolitical grounds, Frum’s assessments are highly questionable. Intervention in Iraq has certainly provoked fundamental dislocations in the area, and has inflamed ethnic and religious rivalries. Certainly, the neighbors of Iraq will seek to further their geopolitical goals and to capitalize on, or neutralize, the eventual political outcome, which may be conducive to – or on the contrary harmful, to their interests. Turkey and Iran, especially, but also the entire Middle East, will be watching – and intervening – in any developments that could affect the stability of their regimes, or create a hopeless humanitarian challenge. Incidentally, Mr. Frum overlooks the critical human toll of the war on Iraq: interior displacement and the outflow of refugees. Surely, the humanitarian crisis in Iraq is not a mere detail, especially for three reasons: first, displaced populations are fertile breeding pools for despair and terrorism, second, they can trigger conflict for the seizure of land and ethnic cleansing, and

finally, this is a crucial factor that can certainly affect geopolitical interests among political actors.

Following on Mr. Frum's observations on the strategic successes of the Bush administration, one can dispute his bright assessment of any military endorsement of India. The U.S. needed to prioritize. It was paramount to maintain a functioning alliance with India's neighbor, Pakistan, on which depends the hunting down of Osama Bin Laden, and which harbors several terrorist groups, which, whatever its claims to Washington, it needs to assuage. As a result of this attempt to cajole two traditional fierce contenders, recent years do not relate a happy chapter of harmonious relations, but rather a constant juggling to defuse crises between India and Pakistan, especially since a conflict between them would have meant a concentration of Pakistani troops to its Southern border with India, and hence, a neglect of its Northern border with Afghanistan. The lack of focus on Pakistan has also abetted terrorist activity, and its spilling over into India. The U.S. balancing of Pakistan and India, furthermore, has had wider ramifications, since it was a development closely watched by Pakistan's ally, China. Relations with China, which Mr. Frum considers to have been successfully managed by Washington, have also been impaired by the recent invasion of America's ally Georgia in territories that Russia considers part of its sphere of influence. While China may not have recognized the breakaway Republics, it is watchful of any potentially destabilizing developments in Central Asia. Any further possible rapprochement of Moscow and Beijing will also affect negatively from the US perspective, relations with Iran.

Regarding Latin America, Mr. Frum makes the cryptic suggestion that Mr. Hugo Chavez has been left with "enough rope to hang himself." Aside from reports that the U.S. actively intervened in 2002 to depose the Venezuelan President, it must be added that in fact, the United States has been quite active in supporting the Venezuelan's President's nemesis, Colombian President Uribe, in militarizing the drug issue – and contributing as a result to polarize countries in the Southern hemisphere along obsolete Cold War lines. Certainly, Washington has been successful in alienating several countries to its South.

The signing of the first international convention against cyberterrorism, is not primarily a US, but a European initiative (The U.S., Canada, Japan, and other countries are not part of the organization). Washington's endorsement of said initiative is paying pure lip service to multilateral

agreements that have been widely shunned during both terms of President George W. Bush.

Finally, Mr. Frum mentions that because this nation has not suffered any attacks comparable to 9/11 since 2001, one must infer that Washington's policies have made us safer. Of course, one cannot quarrel with events that have not happened. But one could venture that Osama Bin Laden has no reason now to expose himself and expend massive resources when he accomplished exactly what he wanted: billions of dollars of expenditures in launching wars, the total neglect of infrastructure, the loss of thousands of tourists who are wary of staying in line for hours dealing with airport. Decay and bankruptcy is what he sought, and fear is what he wanted to instill. Can anyone doubt that he succeeded?

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Further suggested readings:

On the refugee crisis in Iraq, see Refugees international, " Release: U.S. Goals for Iraqi Refugees are Inadequate," September 12, 2008. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/10835/> The website contains interesting links on the subject. For a more general perspective, access the website of the U.S. High Commissioner for Refugees, and click on "The Global Appeal, 2008-2009". <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/3b7b87e14.html>

On the crises between Pakistan and India, check out this title from the Brookings Institute: P.R. Chari, Parvaiz Iqbal Cheema, Stephen P. Cohen, Four Crises and a Peace Process. American Engagement in South Asia, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2007.

On the general destabilization of the area brought about by the war in Iraq, and the spillover of terrorism into Uzbekistan, see Ahmed Rashid, Descent into Chaos. The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, New York, Viking, 2008. On the ramifications of U.S. policy as it affects Turkey, see Philip H. Gordon and Omer Taspinar, Winning Turkey. How America, Europe and Turkey Can Revive a Fading Partnership, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, two veteran practitioners of U.S. foreign affairs, express some doubt that Russia will gravitate towards China. See their new book, *America and the World. Conversations on the Future of American Foreign Policy*, New York, Basic Books, 2008. On the other hand, Parag Khanna of the New American Foundation, points out the multifaceted ways in which China is repositioning itself as the new winner in the global arena, while the U.S. expends time and resources in the Middle East. He suggests that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes important Central Asian powers as well as Russia and China "may eventually become the 'NATO of the East'": Parag Khanna, "Waving Good-bye to Hegemony," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/magazine/27world-t.html?ref=magazine&pagewanted=print>

This article is adapted from his book, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, New York, Random House, 2008.

For interesting contributions on the "new Cold War" in the Andes, see Farid Kahhat, "¿Guerra Fría en los Andes?", as well as Craig A. Deare, "La militarización en América Latina y el papel de Estados Unidos," *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, 2008, Vol.8, No.3, pp. 35-41, 22-34.