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LECTURE TRANSCRIPT

April 8, 2003

AFTER BIPOLARITY: BALANCING AGAINST MR. BIG

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The history of the modern state system proffers a number of watershed dates: 1648, when the Westphalian order of state sovereignties was established in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War; 1815, when the Vienna Congress disposed of Napoleon's conquests and reshaped the European balance; 1919 and 1945 when a new order was born in the aftermath of Germany's grab for hegemony.

My favorite recent watershed is March 5, 2003. Why March 5? What great event transpired on this already forgotten date? That day is worth remembering because this was the day when France, Germany and Russia appeared on stage *à trois* to declare that they would stop America's war against Iraq by voting against any such resolution in the U.N. Security Council.

This is what historians, when French was still the language of diplomacy, call a *renversement des alliances*, a reversal of alliances. Akin to the "mother of all reversals" in 1757 when the French and the Austrians, mortal enemies for two centuries, suddenly banded together in any alliance against Frederick the Great, the king of upstart Prussia. The point of this tale is to highlight the contours of a newly international order that may well have begun to emerge on March 5 of this year. Two long-time American allies, Germany and France, suddenly joined hands with their old enemy Russia to oppose their former friend, the United States. If these new system grows and persists, it will supersede for good the old order that was born on the ruins of the Nazi conquest in 1945.

What was the old order, and what might be the features of the new?

The old order was called "bipolarity. It had three defining characteristics:
One, power was concentrated at the top, in the hands of the United States and the Soviet Union.

Two, alliances were fixed and frozen. There was not one iota of a chance that France or Germany would switch to the Soviet side.

Three, though astronomically bigger than all of the rest, U.S. and Soviet power were nicely stalemated because the two giants contained, constrained and thus largely neutralized each other.

The death of bipolarity can be fixed in time with a high degree of precision. It occurred on Christmas Day 1991 when the hammer-and-sickle flag over the Kremlin was hauled down for the last time and replaced by the tricolour of Russia. On the day, the Soviet Union committed suicide by self-dissolution; suddenly the other pole of the bipolar system was no more. The United States now was the "last remaining superpower," and this was bound to have enormous consequences.

Why did it take a full dozen years, until March 5, 2003 for these consequences to become fully visible?

One answer is that world history always moves at its own pace. It took about 7 years, until 1822, for the anti-Napoleon alliance to fall apart. The anti-German alliance of World War I collapsed in the mid-1920s. And ten years had to pass for another “reversal of alliances” after 1945, when defeated (West) Germany was fully incorporated into America’s anti-Soviet alliance by the name of NATO.

And thus this time, the Alliance has been dying a slow death ever since Christmas Day 1991. After victory in the Cold War, NATO lost its central purpose and began to crumble like a bridge no longer in use – slowly, almost invisibly. In 1994, the departure of the last Russian troops from Central Europe signaled that Moscow’s capitulation was complete.

What was the silent, but historical message of this surrender? The Europeans saw their existential dependence on the United States lifted, and the latter its lesser, but still vital need for a European glacis. The historical consequences did not take long to assert themselves.

By the time of the Bosnian Wars (1995-1999), NATO as quasi-supranational army was already defunct, for those who fought alongside the U.S. were but a loose coalition of the willing and able. The clearest watershed was 9/11. It was not that the Europeans withheld fealty from the United States; indeed, as the Alliance invoked Article 5, numerous NATO members contributed forces to the American cause. The deeper message of 9/11 and the Afghan campaign was one of systemic transformation.

Above all, the United States demonstrated a surfeit of autonomous power, much more so than in the first Iraq war, that finally rendered explicit the transition from bi- to unipolarity. The U.S. was now truly Mr. Big and Number One. Moving unopposed, and then several military-technological orbits above the rest, it needed merely assistants, not allies. And so Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld would famously proclaim that the mission determines the coalition and not the other way round. This spelled the unheralded demise of NATO as we knew it – as a community that would either act together or not at all. Alliance was now ad hoc and *à la carte*.

Or even less, as the run-up to the Second Iraq War demonstrated. History and theory have always predicted more than just the death of alliances as price of victory. The larger warning was that the international system abhors imbalances, that power begets counter-power. Surreptitiously, balancing against the United States had already begun in the latter 1990s when it regularly found itself alone and on the other side of such issues as the ABM Treaty, the Complete Test Ban or the International Criminal Court.

At heart, all of these duels were not about principle, but power. If the United States wanted to scratch the ABM Treaty in favor of Missile Defense, Europe, China and Russia strenuously tried to uphold it on the sound assumption that a better defense makes for a better offense, hence for richer U.S. military options than under conditions of vulnerability. A less-than-complete Test Ban would also enhance U.S. options by allowing the development of smaller, hence more useable nuclear weapons. Naturally, Europe *et al.* insisted on adherence while the U.S. balked. And so with the International Criminal Court (ICC). In the end, even the Clinton Administration correctly understood the underlying thrust of the ICC. Claiming the right to pass judgment on military interventions by prosecuting malfeasants *ex post facto*, the Court might constrain, if not deter America’s forays abroad.

Not to put too fine a point on it, Europe and others cherished this expansion of multilateral oversight precisely for the reason why the United States opposed it. Great powers loathe international institutions they cannot dominate; lesser nations like them the way the Lilliputians liked their ropes on Gulliver. The name of the game was balancing-on-the-sly, and both sides knew it, though it was conducted in the name of law, not of power.

The contest turned from jiu-jitsu to wrestling in summer of 2002 – once the Bush administration began to prepare the world for a second round against Saddam Hussein. The first clarion call was Gerhard's Schröder's indictment of American "adventurism." It was followed by a categorical refusal to join the American effort – not even under a U.N. mandate. In the *Land* campaigns of Hesse and Lower Saxony in January 2003, he went one worse by threatening to vote against a war resolution in the Security Council.¹

To argue that Schröder tapped into the reservoir of German pacifism to save his sinking campaign, misses the deeper point. Spawned by strategic imperative, the Federal Republic was practically the child of America. No German chancellor, even of the left, would have dared play politics with the American connection while Soviet armies were poised to lunge across the Fulda Gap. Better to lose the elections than to lose the Americans.

That Schröder chose to save himself provides the most vivid proof of bipolarity lost and dependence unhinged. Indeed, the demise of bipolarity abroad translated immediately into its collapse at home. For fifty years, there had always been an "American party" in the system – the Christian Democratic and Liberal right – and a victorious one, to boot. Yet this time, their leaders did not rush to the defense of the United States; unlike the Adenauers and Kohls, they merely squirmed and waffled.² It may be true that all politics is local, but it helps to have a permissive international environment on your side.

The French, an Economy power that always tries to fly Business, played a subtler game. From De Gaulle onward, they have sought to capitalize on their nuisance value. Patiently and skillfully, they went up against the U.S. in the Security Council to execute (with Russia and China) a supple balancing strategy. The purpose was to entangle Gulliver in the ropes of great-power diplomacy. And entangle they did – when the U.S. consented to prosecute its war against Iraq by way of the U.N.. The fruits of France's labor was Resolution 1441: dire threats against Iraq, but no automaticity of force; "serious consequences," but U.N. inspections first.

When Hans Blix returned from his various forays, France's stand predictably hardened. The signal, repeated by Moscow and Beijing, was "more inspections" – on the plausible assumption that the approach of spring and summer would close America's window of military opportunity and postpone an attack *sine die*. Compared to Schröder's foot-stomping, this was a far more subtle performance, but the underlying thrust was the same. The objective was to constrain and contain the United States that had mutated from "last remaining superpower" to "hyperpower" and "empire."

And why not, given that America's might was no longer stalemated by the Soviet Union? The French and the Germans (as well as Russia and China) acted as if they feared the "hyperpower" more than Saddam's imperialist reflexes and his vehicles of mass destruction. And well they might in this new era of Gulliver Unbound. Assume an American victory that is not only swift, but also sustainable, that will intimidate rather than inflame Arabs and Iranians, that will relieve dependence on demanding clients such as Saudi-Arabia and Egypt. Such an outcome will install the U.S. as arbiter over the Middle East, over its oil and politics.

This prospect can hardly enthuse the lesser players, for it would certify what is already the case de facto: the global primacy of the United States. So it should not come as a surprise that America's rivals and former allies would try to balance against No. 1 by enmeshing him in the ropes of institutional dependence. And balance they did, all the way to March 5 when former friends and old foes ganged up on Mr. Big by vowing to veto any war resolution in the Security Council.

How will this story of bipolarity lost unfold? The only thing we know is that the past is not over yet. Suddenly, on January 31, those who would fashion a diplomatic axis against the United States found themselves

¹ In January 2003, Germany entered the Security Council as a rotating member; in February, it became chairman.

² By March 2003, parts of the Christian Democrats, notably their leader Angela Merkel, cautiously maneuvered to return to the American fold, but hardly to the universal applause of the rest of the party.

confronted with an equally soft alliance against themselves – when Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Denmark and Portugal ever so politely told Messrs. Chirac and Schröder to back off. In Diplomatese, the message said of Iraq: “Our goal is to safeguard world peace and security by insuring that this regime gives up its weapons of mass destruction. Our governments have a common responsibility to face this threat.” And: “We are confident that the Security Council will face up to its responsibility.”

Decoded, however, the missive read: “We are not amused that France and Germany are trying to gang up on the United States. Saddam must be disarmed, by force if need be.” The message, repeated by the “Vilnius-10” a few days later, was that 18 European countries (from A like Albania to S like Slovenia) were not yet ready to take on the “hyperpower” – and even less ready to submit to the French and Germans as would-be gang leaders. The implication for U.S. policy is ambiguous. On the one hand, it has lost its former “Continental sword,” Germany. Germany’s escape from dependence was the most vivid illustration of system transformation, for the French have opposed the U.S. in the past without ever completely slamming the door on cooperation; true to style, they dispatched their aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* toward the Suez Canal while entrapping Washington in the corridors of the U.N.

On the other hand, the U.S. may have gained a large group of new playmates. The Euro-8 and the Vilnius-10 are a motley bunch. Some of them resent the Franco-German tandem’s claim to Europe leadership, other would rather depend for their security on a remote superpower than on weaker, nearby neighbours with the strong Continental ambitions. Indeed, the closer geographically a nation to Russia, the closer it feels politically to the United States. At any rate, if NATO was the first victim of system transformation, Europe’s pretension to a common foreign and security policy was the second. The game is now wide open for balance-and-maneuver on the part of all comers. As the broadsides of the 18 showed, the U.S. can play this game, too.

The point here is system transformation, no matter what. Frozen alliances and loyalties are now definitely a thing of the past. It is “Back to the Future,” with shifting coalitions and allegiances, with mixed games of cooperation and competition. But history whispers ever more loudly that power shall be balanced, that great power begets counter-power. And since the United States is the one and only “hyperpower,” since it dominates the global chessboard along all dimensions - military, economic, and cultural -, the target of balancing will be the United States. This has been and will be the price of overwhelming power. Or to borrow from Freud: The anatomy of the international system is its destiny.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

How well is the United States equipped to play this old-new game of balance and maneuver? Balancing in the way of 18th and 19th century Britain has not been America’s greatest forte, given those classical cycles of American foreign policy that have swung back and forth between retraction and unilateralism.

But let us pose another question: Is there perhaps an escape from this dour verdict of history and theory that power shall be balanced? Perhaps – if America learned to soften the edge of its unprecedented power with the soothing balm of trust. In his State of the Union Address of 2003, George W. Bush did not hold out such relief when he asserted, “In the end, the course of this nation does not depend on the decisions of others.”

Does this imply the road to empire? Real empires routinely crush their rivals, and they go on conquering until they are exhausted, like Rome, Russia or Turkey. But America is only an “imperial republic,” as Raymond Aron mused forty years ago. Democracies, as his compatriot Alexis de Tocqueville reminded us, are fickle and inward-bound. Presumably, they pay “decent respect to the opinions of mankind” because they cherish that respect for themselves. They are better off leading by heeding because they cannot sustain the brutish ways of Rome for any length of time.

There is also practical matter that highlights some critical differences between the 21st and the 19th century. Apart from crushing characters as despicable and dangerous as Saddam Hussein, the most interesting

issues of our century are not amenable to military solutions. The U.S. can wipe out the Saddams on its own, and as the sorry failure of the U.N. since the end of the First Iraq War has shown, sometimes No. 1 must act on its own. But beyond the Saddams of this world, there is a myriad issues that can only be resolved by the many acting in cooperation.

What are these issues? Let's start with Iraq. Who will pacify postwar Iraq if not a significant part of the international community? Who will help in the war against terror and proliferation? As we speak, there are U.S. customs agents in the port of Hamburg checking for dangerous contraband in containers bound for the East Coast. As we speak, FBI agents and federal prosecutors are cooperating with their counterparts all over the world. Such wars cannot be won *tout seul*, not to speak of the never-ending campaigns against protectionism, drugs, AIDS, illegal migration, waters shortages, climate changes or overpopulation. "To pay decent respect to the opinions of mankind," therefore, is not the counsel of wimpishness, but of wisdom. For it pays off on very practical matters dear to the American national interest.

Unwilling to conquer, this "empire" still needs order beyond borders. The objective is the right "milieu," as Arnold Wolfers put it forty years ago. To achieve it, America must sometimes use force; to sustain it, the sword is not enough, and at any rate, too costly if used too often. But to build the right coalitions for peace, the United States must not forsake the "co" in "coalition" – as in "consensus" and "cooperation."

And America's would-be balancers. As the Second Iraq War shows, France and Germany, even with China and Russia in the background are simply too weak to "gang up" effectively against Mr. Big. The cruel truth is that they could not stop the American war against Saddam, nor force the U.S. to certify the "multipolarity" President Chirac has been demanding by yielding pride of place to the U.N. in the reconstruction of Iraq. (Within this context, the Security Council would again act as a "force multiplier" for France et al.) The moral of this tale is that true multipolarity, as in the 18th or 19th century, will remain a pipe dream for many years, if not decades. Another moral, however is, that on the other chessboards of power – the diplomatic or economic one – unipolarity will not prevail either. The Lilliputians will presumably draw the lesson that they cannot manage the global system *against* the United States; they are simply too poor when it comes to the ultimate, that is, military, currency of power. Gulliver, on the other hand, learned that it was hard enough to be a friendly giant among the pigmies. It will even be harder to escape their slings and arrows when his strength is untempered by self-restraint. For as the breakdown of the old bipolar order and the birth of a yet shrouded new order show, power will be balanced.