



The Big Four Alliance: The New Bush Strategy

By Thomas Donnelly

Over the past six months, the Bush administration has upgraded its budding “strategic partnerships” with Japan and India. Along with the steady “special relationship” with Great Britain, what is beginning to emerge is a global coalition system—it is too soon to call it a true alliance—for the post-Cold War world. Much work remains to be done to translate the expressions of similar political interests and values into usable military strength. Still, the prospects for expanding the number of genuine “stakeholders” in the Pax Americana are quite bright.

It used to be the fashion to pillory the Bush administration for its unilateralism. The worst offense was not removing Saddam Hussein from power, but “going it alone” (never mind the British and the other members of the coalition). And even in Afghanistan, the snub of NATO’s offer to slow the operation down to a Kosovo-like pace was thought to cloud the justice of the war.

Now, the editorialists of the *New York Times* have discovered:

[T]he Bush administration has been going out of its way to build up its military ties with countries surrounding China. India and Japan are the two most troubling examples. Washington has pressed ahead with an ill-advised initiative to share civilian nuclear technology with India, despite that country’s refusal to abide by the restrictions of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. And it has actively encouraged an already worrisomely nationalist Japanese government to shed postwar restraints on its military and embrace more ambitious regional security goals. Washington has also taken steps to strengthen military

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cooperation with Vietnam and Indonesia. Mr. Bush’s stopover in Mongolia [was] likewise . . . aimed at cementing a new security partnership.¹

The reactionary Left is shocked, but there has been an even larger pattern of alliance-building that has been going on out of sight of the newsrooms of the mainstream media. Indeed, far from maintaining a unilateralist approach to American security, the Bush administration has been cementing a globe-spanning structure of strategic partnerships that has the potential not only to “contain” China, but also to sustain and enhance the liberal international order of the post-Soviet era.

You might call this emerging set of alliances the “four-by-four” strategy. It is built around four great powers—the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and India—who share four basic strategic principles—that the dangers of radicalism, failing despotic governments, and nuclear proliferation in the greater Middle East are too great to ignore; that the growing military strength and political ambitions of Beijing’s autocrats make it far from certain that China’s “rise” will be a peaceful one; that the spread of representative forms of government will increase the prospects for a durable peace; and that military force

remains a useful and legitimate tool of national statecraft.

It is no accident that the four pillars of this emerging alliance stand in roughly similar geostrategic position relative to the Eurasian landmass. In the nomenclature of international relations theorists, the United States, Britain, Japan, and India fit the traditional profile of “offshore balancers”—powers apart from, but with vital interests in, Eurasia. In India’s case, the Himalayas’ ranges give, albeit less perfectly, the separation that the English Channel, the Sea of Japan, and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans have given to others, but the basic relationships are the same.

With this separation has come a desire to retain a measure of insulation from the turbulence and violence of politics of Europe and Asia. It is wrong to inflate this wish for insulation into anything more—the statesmen and strategists of these peripheral powers have come to understand that a policy of complete isolation is not sustainable and no more than a temporary expedient. And whatever the splendors of isolation in the past, the realities of international politics in the 21st century have obscured them. In the greater Middle East, there are few reliable “on-shore” partners to help us balance; they are themselves the source of much of the risk. Modern and modernizing China is already a global power with interests and policies that extend far beyond its immediate continental and maritime borders. The safety and security of the four “off-shore” great powers is more closely bound with what happens on the Eurasian shore than ever before.

Primus Inter Pares

The central pillar of the new alliance is, of course, the United States. No other power can perform this essential organizing and leadership role. It is not simply that the United States enjoys history’s only hyper-power status—the unrivaled military, diplomatic, economic, and moral dynamism of post-Cold War America is recognized even by those who hate it most—but it also enjoys a century-long experience of alliance management. Through two world wars and a long Cold War, Washington emerged as not only the capital of the United States but also as the capital of the “free world.” Presidents of both parties have retained these almost unconscious habits; the Clinton administration took the primacy of the United States as much for granted as has the Bush administration.

There is no reason to think that the next Democratic administration will change this fundamental approach. For all the heated attacks on the administration—and it is amazingly reminiscent of the unreasoning Clinton-bashing of the congressional Republicans in the 1990s on the Balkans, Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, and Iraq—it is painfully clear that the Democratic leadership in Congress has no alternative strategy either for Iraq or the world. Their blind hatred consumed even Representative John Murtha (D-Pa.), whose troop-withdrawal proposal ended in an entirely predictable defeat in the House. The House Democrats’ attempts to trade on Murtha’s personal courage were exposed as a sham, possibly punctuating a distinguished patriot’s political career with a final embarrassment. Nor is the argument about Iraq intended to be a debate about the larger question of the U.S. role in the world. Just as the Truman Doctrine committed the United States to lead the Cold War allies, so has the Bush Doctrine cast the country as *primus inter pares* among today’s allies; Britain, India, and Japan are becoming partners in a Pax Americana that is generally accepted across the political spectrum.

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To be sure, the U.S. position of primacy and the American peace have taken—and continue to exact—a price in blood and treasure. But it is not simply that a prize dearly won is harder to relinquish. More deeply, the tenets of the Bush Doctrine and the position of leadership are rooted in American strategic culture, as I have argued before in this space.² We Americans assert that our political principles of liberty, individual rights, representative government, and the like are universally applicable, to all peoples, in all times. These principles shape our attitudes in international politics as well as in domestic affairs; our actions reflect not just a narrow calculus of the balance of power that favors our material and security interests, but the pursuit of a larger “balance of power that favors freedom,” as President George W. Bush has put it.³

These peculiarly American attitudes have never been more on display than during the post–Cold War period. Freed from the zero-sum struggle with the Soviet Union, the United States has, in general terms and imperfectly, seized the opportunity to use its unchecked great power in pursuit of its principles. How else to explain the Clinton administration’s actions in the Balkans or Bush’s goals, not just to remove the Taliban from Afghanistan or Saddam from Iraq, but to construct representative governments in their place?

At the same time, it is clear that the Defense Department’s initial conception of “transformation”—substituting capital for labor, firepower for manpower—has not removed the inherent constraints imposed by a small force, reduced by 40 percent from its final Cold-War strength. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s preference for temporary “coalitions of the willing” has been supplanted by a new understanding that preserving the Pax Americana requires more permanent arrangements. This is not to suggest that the emerging Big Four allies are not willing partners, but simply to grasp that the immensity and difficulty of the military and broader security tasks have stretched current U.S. armed forces to a degree that they cannot sustain. We need help.

The Special Relationship

Great Britain has been our most constant source of strategic and military help, and the “special relationship” has been renewed and revitalized in the post–Cold War period by Prime Minister Tony Blair. He has played a central role in pressing the Clinton administration into reluctant action in the Balkans—particularly without a UN mandate in Kosovo and then pushing for the commitment of ground troops, a threat which eventually convinced the Serbs of their defeat—and in supporting the Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Blair’s unique role in shaping American strategy in recent years was reflected in his award of the Congressional Gold Medal in 2003. “I feel a most urgent sense of mission about today’s world,” he said in his acceptance address before a joint session of the House and Senate. “There never has been a time when the power of America was so necessary.” But, “as Britain knows, all predominant power seems for a time invincible, but, in fact, it is transient. The question is: What do you leave behind? And what you can bequeath to this anxious world is the light of liberty.”⁴

But Blair’s very uniqueness adds an element of uncertainty to the future of the special relationship. As historian Alan Ryan recently observed, “Blair has always been an unlikely leader of the Labour Party. His convictions are Christian and humanitarian, not socialist; he has no sentimental ties to the labor movement from which the Labour Party sprang, and on whose financial and organizational support it has for a hundred years depended. He is not interested in the history of his party.”⁵ It is also pretty clear that Blair’s party is losing interest in him; the defeat in Parliament of the government’s bill on detaining terror suspects and the widespread belief that the prime minister “lied” about prewar intelligence on Iraq have made Blair increasingly unpopular. And many Britons, especially Britons of the chattering classes, loathe George W. Bush even more.

Thus there remains some question about the long-term health of the Anglo-American alliance. Blair’s likely successor, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, is cut from the same “New Labour” mold, and his fiscal policies have been much closer to Blair and Tory economic policy than to old Labour.⁶ For their part, the Tories had little to offer in the past campaign other than “Blair Lied!” and while their support for the United States in the Middle East is strong, domestically the party is a shambles.

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Finally, there is the question of British armed forces. These remain superbly professional forces, on a par with U.S. forces and possessed of particular strengths in special operations and expeditionary warfare. The Blair government has reoriented the British military back toward interoperability with American forces after a brief Euro-flirtation. But the problem with British forces as with our own is that they are overstretched, underfunded, and generally too small to sustain all the missions they have been given. Indeed, while the Rumsfeld Pentagon has at least stopped cutting for the moment the size of U.S. ground forces, the British army has continued to shrink. And it is unclear how much force the British could project in a crisis in East Asia, even

if British leaders were so disposed. Nonetheless, the Anglo-American military alliance remains the gold standard against which all others are measured and to which others—particularly the Japanese alliance—aspire.

A Normal Nation

The idea of remodeling the alliance with Japan along the lines of the special relationship with Great Britain has been in the air since October 2000, when the National Defense University published a study commonly called the “Armitage Report” after just-retired Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.⁷ The report, which called upon Japan to reconsider its constitutional strictures on the use of military force, provoked a discussion in Tokyo that continues even now. Japan’s dynamic prime minister Junichiro Koizumi has been in the forefront of this debate, but politicians across the spectrum now accept the premise that Japan should act like a “normal” nation and should assume some role in “collective self-defense”—a euphemism for an alliance with the United States.

Koizumi’s efforts have benefited from the genuine fears felt in Japan about the militancy of the Chinese, at first over Taiwan but now also directed at Tokyo. Moreover, North Korea’s missile and nuclear programs—as well as the kidnappings of Japanese citizens—have raised concerns over the regime in Pyongyang to the point where Japan has become an important partner in U.S. missile defense projects. Tokyo is considering whether to lash its colors to the American mast even more closely by linking sensors and possibly interceptors in Japan into the nascent U.S. national missile defense program. And the September 11 terrorist attacks and the possibility of terrorists employing weapons of mass destruction struck a responsive chord in Tokyo, reminding the Japanese of the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway in 1995.

Thus Japan has participated in both operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Though the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) have remained in logistical, non-combat roles and the deployments required special legislation in the Diet, the Koizumi government has declared its intention to support the United States in the Middle East. While Japan’s dependence on imported oil makes clear its economic and material interest, much of Tokyo’s effort is driven by a desire to transform its alliance with the United States into a more equal partnership.

At this point, however, it must be said that this transformation is an expression of intent that will take many years to make real. The SDF are highly modern and well-equipped forces, not only with capable home-grown systems but also U.S.-supplied weaponry such as Aegis surface combatants. But the operational experience of the SDF is limited; the individual services remain insular institutions and the Japanese general staff is weak. Senior Japanese military men understand that they need a crash course in modern, joint operations even as they learn to operate in conjunction with U.S. forces.

Finally, for all the boldness of the Koizumi government, significant legal and political barriers stand in the way of greater alliance cooperation. Japanese public opinion is growing increasingly comfortable with a more robust military posture, but not even Koizumi, recently reelected with an increased majority in the legislature, is ready to tackle the issue of constitutional reform directly. And Japanese defense spending is still limited—at least formally—to 1 percent of gross domestic product. In short, there is a tremendous gap between Japanese potential and current capability.

No Longer “Non-Aligned”

Greater still is the gap between India’s potential as an alliance partner and the current reality. Nevertheless, it may be that, over the course of time, the strategic relationship between Washington and New Delhi can become the keystone to preservation of the Pax Americana. The CIA has concluded that India is the most important “swing state” in the international system.⁸

The wooing of India has been a long courtship dating back to the late Clinton administration, but has received more intense attention from the start of the Bush administration and the tenure of Robert Blackwill as ambassador. This past summer’s summit in Washington with India’s prime minister Manmohan Singh brought the partnership to a new level, with agreements on “common security objectives” and a de facto recognition of India as a legitimate nuclear power.⁹

This represents a new romance for India as well. The “non-aligned” habits of the Cold War years and the close defense industrial cooperation with the Soviet Union have left legacies that will take years to wash away. Beyond nuclear issues, New Delhi deeply wants to be made a permanent member of the UN Security

Council; India may well come to understand the shortcomings of the international body, but that, too, is for the future. And, of course, coming to a common agreement on how to deal with Pakistan will not be easy.

Further, translating diplomatic desire into hard-core military power and interoperability between Indian and U.S. forces will take many years. Apart from the still-significant inventory of Soviet weaponry, India has shopped the international arms market for a variety of subsystems that it has cobbled together into an increasingly modern capability but one that may prove difficult to integrate with U.S. systems. While arms transfers are intended to be a major element of U.S.-India strategic cooperation, it remains to be seen just what technological hurdles must be surmounted.

Moreover the challenges of combined operations in the field will be daunting. The Indian military has some tradition of power projection and out-of-area operations, but that was in the context of British imperial forces. At the same time, the Indian military has a lot of experience dealing with Islamic terrorist and guerrilla forces in Kashmir, as well as distant experience against the Chinese. Military-to-military contacts with U.S. forces are increasing, but neither Indian nor Japanese forces yet enjoy the kind of close professional relationship that has existed for many years between U.S. and British armed services.

In truth, the whole concept of a "Big Four" global partnership is more potential than real. There is not much chance of any Big Four summits or alliance charters on the horizon. Indeed, such a summit would be counterproductive; even if successful, this would be an alliance that dares not speak its name. Still, a certain

amount of strategic cooperation has begun, and there is an apparent method in the Bush administration's madness, as the *New York Times*—and the Chinese, as well—have discovered. The open question is whether common interests and common values can make this coalition a more permanent basis for American strategy.

Notes

1. "A Cold War China Policy," *New York Times*, November 19, 2005.
2. Thomas Donnelly, "Empire of Liberty: The Historical Underpinnings of the Bush Doctrine," *National Security Outlook* (June 2005), available at www.aei.org/publication22756.
3. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (The White House: Washington, D.C., September 2002), available at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html.
4. Tony Blair, (speech to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, Washington, D.C., July 17, 2003); transcript available at <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/07/17/blair.transcript/>.
5. Alan Ryan, "Waiting for Gordon Brown," *New York Review of Books*, June 23, 2005.
6. Ibid.
7. Institute for National Strategic Studies, "The United States and Japan: Advancing towards a Mature Partnership," *INSS Special Report*, October 2000, available at http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/SR_01/SR_Japan.htm.
8. Dan McDougall, "India is the New American Dream," *Scotland on Sunday*, July 24, 2005.
9. Office of the Press Secretary of the White House, "President, Indian Prime Minister Exchange Toasts," news release, July 18, 2005.