

# Letters to the Editor

## Contending cultures of counterterrorism

*To the Editor:*

In their article ‘Contending cultures of counterterrorism: transatlantic divergence or convergence?’ (*International Affairs* 81: 5, 2005), Wyn Rees and Richard J. Aldrich propose that historically determined strategic cultures shape the different responses of Europe and America to terrorism. In particular, they contend that while there may be recent signs of convergence at the level of strategic doctrine, a fundamental gulf remains between American unilateralism and European multilateralism, which may have major implications for the future of their relationship.

It is true that cultural outlooks have played a part in shaping the contemporary consciousness and actions of the major powers. American isolationism and exceptionalism, contrasted to European incongruity and diversity, appears to shape the patterns they describe.

However, this ignores the extent to which strategic cultures vary more through time than across space. In many ways, the parallels between the outlooks of the United States and Europe are more striking today than the differences. For instance, all parties are clear that unilateralism is the dirty word of international relations, hiding their international agendas behind various multilateral institutions—the UN, NATO and other, increasingly arbitrary coalitions.

Former French premier Lionel Jospin chastised America for acting unilaterally in the war on terror. Others have attacked the US for acting unilaterally over the Kyoto Protocol. But, rather than defending their right to act unilaterally, US leaders have simply thrown the unilateralist insult back at their critics.

‘For the German chancellor to say he will have nothing to do with action against Saddam Hussein, even if approved by the United Nations, *is* unilateralism’, argued Pentagon hawk Richard Perle in the run-up to the conflict in Iraq. Other commentators suggested that French forces were acting unilaterally in the Ivory Coast. ‘Right now resolutions are being unilaterally subverted by the Iraqi regime’, argued President Bush in his address to the UN in September 2002, continuing ‘we want the resolutions of the world’s most important

multilateral body to be enforced'.

No doubt, these remarks had a self-serving nature, but that the US administration went to such lengths to deny any 'strategic or selfish' interest in Iraq, returning again and again to the UN to have its actions sanctioned by 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys' goes beyond mere rhetoric.

It points to the great uncertainty among the major powers as to how to handle international relations in the post-Cold War world order, as revealed in numerous articles in various foreign policy journals, as well as through the growing number of supposedly humanitarian interventions across the globe, from Somalia and Bosnia to Kosovo and Afghanistan.

But, rather than being driven by concern for people across the world, such actions were an attempt to gain the support of their critics and invest western elites with a sense of moral purpose that was lacking in the domestic sphere. The end result is a world order where all major powers are cautious and defensive about asserting any interests explicitly.

No European power opposed the principle of intervening in Iraq, they simply offered different tactics. And, rather than being shaped through an alternative vision, these were driven by varying degrees of opportunism and fear as to what their electorates might think, as well as what the repercussions of war might be.

Far from having 'a sense of mission in the world and a confidence that its actions are in the broadest interests of humanity', as Rees and Aldrich propose, America too now suffers from a paralysing loss of strategic purpose, which it shares with its European counterparts.

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