

Bush withdraws from the world

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America will pay a heavy price if the President brings the boys home from Europe and Asia, writes Ronald Asmus.

Harry Truman must be turning in his grave. The planned withdrawal of US troops from Europe and Asia that President George Bush announced this week could lead to the demise of America's key alliances across the globe, including the one that Truman considered his greatest foreign policy accomplishment: NATO.

Bush proposes something that generations of US diplomats and soldiers fought to prevent and that America's adversaries sought unsuccessfully to achieve: radical reduction of US political and military influence on the European and Asian continents.

The Bush message also smells of political opportunism. Under pressure but unable to withdraw troops from Iraq, the President has, instead, reached for what his advisers hope is the next best thing politically - a pledge to bring America's boys home from Europe and Asia.

Whether this is good politics remains to be seen. But there is little doubt it is bad strategy and bad diplomacy for which the US is likely to pay a heavy price.

The reasons are fairly simple. In Europe after the Cold War, the US decided to significantly reduce its former troop levels but to leave sufficient forces on the ground to accomplish three objectives: help ensure that peace and stability on the continent would endure; have the capacity to support NATO and European Union expansion and project the communities of democracies eastward; and provide the political and military glue to enable America's allies to reorient themselves militarily and prepare, together with the US, to tackle new conflicts beyond the continent's borders.

Each of these goals remains important. Each will be undercut by Bush's plan. With trans-Atlantic relations badly frayed, Russia turning away from democracy and the US facing the challenge of projecting stability from the Balkans to the Black Sea, Washington should be putting forward a plan to repair the trans-Atlantic alliance, not ruin it.

In Asia the stakes are just as high and the challenges perhaps greater.

There the US faces the long-term challenge of managing the rise of China as a great power. North Korea's eventual collapse and the unification of Korea will raise the question of that country's future geopolitical orientation. And such seismic events will undoubtedly have a considerable impact on the evolution of Japan's role and orientation as well.

US diplomats will have their hands full over the next decade or two trying to win the war on terrorism and help manage these multiple strategic transitions - and will need every ounce of US political and military leverage and muscle if they are to get it right.

Yet in an act of diplomatic hara-kiri, Bush proposes to destroy one of the key pillars of US influence just when this kind of leverage and influence is likely to be needed the most.

His plan is, unfortunately, further evidence of the strategic myopia that has afflicted this Administration and is undercutting America's standing in the world. At a time when it should be mobilising and reinvigorating its alliances in Europe and Asia, the US is dismantling

them.

Instead of creating multilateral structures to mobilise the world in a common struggle against terrorism and new anti-Western ideologies and movements, America opts for a unilateral course that leaves it with fewer friends. Instead of balancing the political and military requirements of a new era and coming up with a new troop-deployment plan that meets both needs, Bush allows the Pentagon to ride roughshod over broader US strategy and destroy the work of generations of diplomats and soldiers.

Is there room for reconfiguring the US military deployment plan overseas and modernising it for a new era? Of course, there is. But such a review must also be part of a new strategic approach to alliance-building to confront the new threats America faces. It must take into account America's political and military requirements and the views of US allies.

Bush should have given a speech on how he planned to repair America's alliances for the future - and America's new global military posture should reflect that goal as well.

Why has no Bush Administration official come forward with any ideas on repairing American alliance relationships?

John Kerry has recognised that the lesson of September 11 is that the US need for allies is going up, not down. He has pledged to make the reinvigoration of US alliances a foreign policy priority. He has claimed that his election would allow for a "fresh start" and close a remarkably divisive chapter in relations with many close US allies.

There is little doubt Kerry's election would be enthusiastically welcomed in Europe and Asia. But it is time for him to take the next step and lay out a concrete plan for how his administration would reverse the damage done by Bush and reinvigorate America's alliances to meet the dangers it faces.

Part of that plan should be to freeze and review the ill-conceived plan the President put forth this week.

Ronald Asmus was US deputy assistant secretary of state for European affairs from 1997 to 2000.

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