

“Stop the chaos domino”

Interview with Wolf Poulet, consultant for international security policy, on major powers and “failing” states

DIAS: The U.S. drive for global hegemony is encountering resistance. What does the European Union have to offer as a counter design?*

Poulet: The U.S. drive for global hegemony is less clear to me. At the moment, the American system is outclassing our European design in terms of economic power, innovative capabilities and flexibility – but this will not last forever. Not only are greater parts of the U.S. society sceptical about this type of global engagement; there is also a volatile Third World phenomenon that exists inside the U.S. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the rapid rise of the sole superpower will continue infinitely. The next downturn will come, for sure. Europe does not need a counter design, since we already have one. Western democracies show two different characteristics; one is oriented towards more freedom, the other one towards more equality. The “freedom model” of the US is not superior to our social and welfare model; it seems more appropriate to say that our focus on the social factor is more consistent and facilitates a sustainable, relatively stable development.

DIAS: Which way are Russia and China going?

Poulet: Russia’s and China’s development seems far from being determined; we have to expect many surprises and ruptures. Considering Russia’s steady return to a centralistic democracy – contradictory in itself – and an increasingly authoritarian state apparatus, it is safe to assume that no Russian “soft power” is emerging that will put the largest country on earth ahead of all other countries. The same applies to the Chinese development.

DIAS: Why does soft power play such a central role?

Poulet: Soft power, in essence, means having the positive aura as a successful system that offers the best development chances possible for every individual. The U.S. is representing soft power; however with lessening intensity. The primary question is whether the U.S. administration will be able to sustain its “pre-potent” arrogance much longer. Actually, as long-term partners and allies of the U.S. Europe should hope it will. The predecessor of the current Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz, Robert Nye, has made an accurate forecast: If the U.S. were to lose its soft power due to its unilateral action that runs the risk of being misinterpreted by others, they will fail to keep their military power. We should keep a close eye on this.

DIAS: How is the U.S. claim to use force pre-emptively affecting the relationship between conflict parties such as India and Pakistan, for instance?

Poulet: Preemption can only be planned and implemented by powers capable of dominating all stages in a potential escalation process, i.e. at any given point of time – neither India nor Pakistan have the according capabilities. A comparison of the operational capabilities of both sides’ military forces would reveal that the actual options for using military force would differ to such a great extent that after all, imitating the American approach is not possible or viable.

DIAS: The US-American hegemony is, despite all misgivings, the most benign of all times. Is it a mistake to challenge it by forming alliances? How can we best escape the circle of alliance- and counteralliance-building – considering the instrumentalization of the UN Security Council prior to the war on Iraq or the discussion about the International Criminal Court?

Poulet: Each hegemony is detrimental to serious opponents. Notwithstanding certain resentments, Europe is a proven partner and hopes to remain partners with the United States. Thus Europe should think long-term – there is life after the George W. Bush administration. Respectable members of the US civil society are expressing it this way: “There are two Americas (and this will not last).” We Europeans have to develop more patience.

DIAS: Many top politicians and diplomats have pointed out the significance of an incisive UN reform that reflects the real balance of power within the UN institutions. Are these demands realistic? What is the best strategy for paving the ground for democratizing the organization?

Poulet: At present, such demands are unrealistic. According to UN insiders, no fundamental UN reform will take place in the foreseeable future. Reforms would have to have the support of the five veto powers, and these are not likely to give up their power privileges on a voluntary basis. Moreover, a democratization of the organisation, if possible at all, would result in the large majority of poor countries with inadequate political systems taking the worldwide lead over the functioning democracies. This is not realistic either. Only the transparent display of single interests, between the continents and regardless of any political preferences, could be a first step out of the stalemate. Whoever comes up with a practical solution today will be promoted tomorrow to become the closest advisor of the Secretary-General.

DIAS: Unless Europe does not manage to strengthen its military capabilities, its strategic role will remain marginal. Political relations are based on power, less on the international rule of law. Will the Europeans be able to make this step and when?

Poulet: The Europeans could expand their military capabilities, for the purpose of projecting democracy worldwide, either today or tomorrow. The key question is whether the majority of European governments is willing to do so and if sufficient domestic support can be built. I doubt it. In my view, the Europeans will only extend their capabilities for power projection purposes if forced by external pressure or threats. Limiting this point is the fact that power is not only exercised militarily but can be well presented via the economic potential.

DIAS: Accordingly, the US is considered the military power; Europe the civil power. Is the joint task of conducting stabilization operations like ISAF in Afghanistan an effective way to combine US-American and European capabilities?

Poulet: Generally, there is only one in command of stabilization operations – why should the commander share the control with other powers who are not using their „blood“? For the military operating conflict party, this would not make sense. Furthermore, Europe is not a civil power in absolute terms. France and Great Britain have been demonstrating their military power whenever they deemed it feasible, and they never informed their counterparts in Brussels, Strasbourg or Berlin prior to taking action.

DIAS: In Afghanistan, the principle of the “lead nation” has been put into practice – one country takes the lead in fulfilling specific sector-related tasks such as the war on drugs. Would you say this division of labor is an effective way to implement a comprehensive security concept?

Poulet: It is not official but many sources in Afghanistan – not only NGOs – are signaling that the coordination among donors could have been better. Apparently these tasks require a greater amount of governmental officials that are competent, able to make decisions, multilingual and prepared to show presence in the field. Take the example of the security and justice sector: If Japan, Germany, Italy and the US act together and take decisive measures in this sector, first progress could be made that is crucial for the entire development of the country. But reality looks different. The ministries of donor countries are lacking diplomatic staff with development policy expertise; therefore, coordination among the donors is often delayed and limited to an exchange between the capitals – in the best case. A donor country that engages in multiple crises in the world cannot manage these new tasks while operating on the basis of conventional governmental structures. Increasing the number of skilled personnel is easier said than done since the creation of such official positions usually requires the approval of the parliament.

DIAS: Germany has set itself an ambitious agenda for the pilot projects in Kundus and Herat which come along with high expectations on the Afghan side. Are there any concrete benchmarks that should be targeted first to send positive signs into other regions of the country?

Poulet: First of all, this is not a management problem that could be developed and solved at two experimental sites and then transferred to other regions! The political settings of these operations are obviously so precarious that one cannot define any „concrete benchmarks“. I recommend reading the points made by the Member of the German Parliament, Dr. Werner Hoyer*, in rejecting the operation in Kundus on behalf of his party. The decision to station German troops in Kundus is primarily based on political role-play and aiming at (re-)approaching the US administration. It is also plausible it is an attempt to compensate for Germany’s unequivocal and populist refusal to join the Iraqi war coalition.

DIAS: Do you consider the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, comprising a civil as well as a military component, a model for future engagements in other crisis regions?

Poulet: Yes. We are operating on new terrain and can only learn from self-made experiences. Let us hope that an unpartisan and competent evaluation will be allowed upon termination of the project.

DIAS: Only if the situation in Afghanistan will be stabilized, a certain degree of inner – as well as social and economic – security will be achieved. What role do the national elections play in this context, are they coming too soon?

Poulet: The democratization process in Afghanistan could take some 50 to 100 years so that any short-term timetables do not seem appropriate at all.

DIAS: In Afghanistan, donor fatigue is setting in. The multilateral operation binds vital resources for an unknown amount of time. What do you think the international engagement in failed states of less vital interest – primarily Africa – will look like?

Poulet: This is a valid question. My fear is that the number of “failed” or “failing” states will be growing. Every time a state fails – i.e. desintegrates – the world is taking a step back: millions of families are dismissed into an uncertain future, new playgrounds are opening for international crime and terrorism, our economy is losing potential trading partners, and so forth. It would be crucial to provide substantial help to all countries that cannot maintain their internal order any more. For me, this represents true prevention. At the same time, this approach requires abandoning traditional diplomatic customs which will provoke justified as well as unjustified criticism from within our own governmental structures. Although all sceptics are right in what they say – at least to some part – they will always strangle any timely, preventive and sustainable cooperative approach.

DIAS: Could you give an example?

Poulet: Only recently, Ivory Coast has been transforming from a positively developing country into a „failing state“. The deep internal tensions between the forces in the North and the South of the country have been well known for years. Its government did ask donor countries for consultancy aid in the security sector. The donors, however, did not prioritize this issue so that in the end they might have contributed to the actual downfall of the country by not preventing it from happening. What we need is a completely new approach to cope with „failed states“ but also with states that are on the brink of failing due to internal structural weaknesses. Supporting these countries is important and a likely milestone in civil crisis prevention because they would be empowered to return to a feasible and humane state order. Lastly, we should critically review the hybrid term of failed or failing states. Would you like to negotiate with a foreign government, if you were representing a failing state? We need a global consensus on a concept for combating state failures. The chaos domino – one state after the other descends into failed status – must stop. Our experiences teach us that all benevolent democratic systems we are lucky to live in are acting strongly once it is already too late to prevent a crisis.

* Dr. Werner Hoyer, MdB:

Kundus-Einsatz ist „Mission impossible“ (Kundus Operation is „Mission impossible“)

The Deputy Head of the FDP Bundestag faction , Dr. Werner Hoyer, MdB, in the German Parliament on October 24, 2003 (in German);

http://www.wernerhoyer.de/2_bundestag/_reden/592.htm

* Dusseldorf Institute for Foreign – and Security Policy, December 2003