Geopolitics Readings

Topic:

World Location:

Countries Involved:

Geography Issues Involved:

Political Issues Involved:

Suggested Solutions to the Problem:
Beyond the SON and Sand

Benoit Aubin, Maclean's
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Photographs of Cuban dissidents are displayed in the window of the Cuba tourist office in Paris, which was occupied by the advocacy group Reporters sans frontières, April 4, 2003. (Photo: AFP)

We are standing on Raúl Rivero’s balcony, smoking pungent Cuban cigarettes, watching the sun set over the dilapidated rooftops of El Cerro, a central, working-class neighborhood in Havana. Cuba’s capital seems much like the cliché: Loud music blares from every window and porch; women dance between potholes and debris; men lean against elegant, decrepit, European-style facades. Boys play baseball in empty lots, hitting cloth-and-tape balls with wooden sticks, and running bases between the famous jalopies of Cuba—these particular ones jacked up on blocks, cannibalized for parts, and rusting in peace.

“Cubans love Havana,” Rivero says in his raspy voice, “and Havana gives it back. It is not cruel to its people.” A hefty man, white hair, big paunch, he could pass for a retired truck driver. “Havana is noble, old, beautiful, and open. It has the heart, the soul, and the indomitable attitude of the great port cities.” Rivero, a poet and journalist, goes on. “But it has been hijacked. It has become a sort of dreadful Pyongyang, dead and deserted at night but for a few pockets of fun and luxury reserved for foreigners and the rich. And we have become a nation of servants who sing and dance at tables for them.”

Rivero is also a political dissident, openly critical of the communist regime that Fidel Castro has so craftily kept in place since 1959. “The socialist revolution has been a failure, and everyone knows it, but nobody says so publicly,” he says. “The regime survives because it is a police state. The government controls information. And it controls the citizens too, by instilling fear. We are kept hostages in our homeland, and have been promised a bright future that keeps being postponed.”

As I express surprise at hearing such hard criticism of a political regime known for silencing its critics, he shrugs. “I am just describing the situation,” he explains. “But I feel less pressure now than, say, five years ago. The stranglehold the government had on the city is loosening.”

Then Rivero adds a statement that is prophetic: “But you never know here. Things in Havana are never quite what they appear to be. Never.”

Indeed. Since March 19, Rivero has been a political prisoner. Not long after our encounter, he was arrested and thrown in jail. Rivero was part of a group of 78 dissidents charged with sedition and threatening national security who were rounded up while the world was looking the other way, at the invasion of Iraq.
The arrests, occurring after the regime had conceded a measure of liberties to citizens, are further examples of the baffling contradictions of this town: It’s an Old World city in the New World, has a socialist economy that runs on U.S. dollars, is a tourist haven in a police state, and sells nostalgia to visitors—while promising citizens a better future.

This latest sweep against dissidents sent ripples through diplomatic and intellectual circles. At first, though, the street in Havana seemed to take it all in stride. “We have seen that happen before,” said a friend who lives here. “Besides, we knew it was coming. The heat had been on for a few weeks. First, they cracked down on drugs in nightclubs, then on jineteras (Havana’s famous hookers), then on all those trying to make private money. It figured the dissidents would be next.” Then, weeks after the rest of the world learned about it, the news broke in Cuba of the dissidents’ sentences—up to 28 years in jail—following lightning-quick trials. Habaneros were stunned into silence.

Havana is too beautiful, too romantic, and just too plain cool to look or feel like a gulag. Waves crash and spill over the Malecón, the spectacular, if derelict, ocean drive, next to fortresses from which real cannons have shot at real pirates. The city has a rich Spanish colonial heritage, vast expanses of ornate buildings. Many are crumbling or have collapsed.

Other things one does not see in Havana also create a powerful impression. Very little electric light at night, so the stars shine between rooftops. Few major arteries, and very little traffic. No neon signs, floodlit gas stations, or fast-food joints, and none of the smoked-mirror, postmodern towers that make the world look the same from Kuala Lumpur to Istanbul.

Instead, Havana has the old American cars—it’s impossible to ignore a sprawling, red-and-cream ’58 Edsel convertible—and the soundtrack: mambo, salsa, cha-cha, and son. Much of it was long-dead folk stuff for locals, but the music is now de rigueur in every cafe and park, thanks to the planetary success of the Buena Vista Social Club.

For tourists, Havana is pure ’50s revisited, and they love it. Close to 2 million tourists visit Cuba annually, mostly from Canada and Europe. Many escape from resorts in Varadero or Cayo Largo for only a day or two in Havana, so they can be excused for believing that their salsa-dancing, rum-soaked, retro-cool good time was the real thing. Hang in a bit longer, though, and you will hear “Guantanamera” played once too often; your gaze will meet that of a Cuban who will tell you, silently: Welcome to Havana, where real life is not as it appears.

In their day-to-day existence, habaneros don’t smoke US$10 Cohiba cigars and don’t drink rum-and-mint mojitos in celebration of Ernest Hemingway. Instead, they smoke cheap, strong Viceroy cigarettes, drink straight brown rum, and listen to kitschy Latino pop on Miami radio. Mostly, they spend their days hatching plans to lay their hands on dollars—real, post-revolutionary, certified yanqui dolares.

The collapse of the Soviet empire a decade ago left Cuba’s economy in dire straits. Castro’s response was to speed up the development of joint ventures with foreign capitalists. Only the state has the right to play the capitalist game. Cuba deals with investors and visitors at an artificially inflated exchange rate of one peso equaling US$1. But for ordinary Cubans, the rate is
25 pesos to the dollar. Cuban nationals and foreigners live side by side, but are not to mingle. Highway tolls are US$2 for extranjeros, two pesos—8 cents—for locals. The few Cubans who could afford hotels are not allowed to go to them. Foreigners are forbidden to frequent the so-called peso bars or to hire the jalopy taxis reserved for locals.

But one part of this system went awry. In 1993, the government made it legal for ordinary Cubans to hold U.S. dollars. The response was an instant black market. “Laying their hands on dollars has become a constant obsession, almost a national sport,” says a French diplomat. “They can be very clever at it.”

They may be clever, but they’re not crooks. At least that’s what my new buddies, Peter and Ernie, tell me as we drink espressos and rum in a peso bar. (Their real names are Pedro and Ernesto, but it’s cool to sport an English name in Havana.) “We are not criminals,” says Peter. “Everywhere else, ours would be considered normal business. You just can’t feed your family otherwise.” Adds Ernie, “We have a saying here: He who steals from a thief gets 100 years of leniency.” They tell me how Cuba’s underground economy works. “Simple: Things fall off the truck,” says Ernie. “The rest can be had por la izquierda—through the left hand.”

Cubans are always stealing from their employer, which is almost always the state. Bags of cement, rice, coffee, kegs of rum, cooking oil, steak, or lobsters (reserved for tourists) fall off the truck and are retailed on the street. The “left hand” provides by diverting services from their initial purpose. A driver filling up his truck will fill an extra jerry can on his employer’s credit card. Cabbies who pick you up on the fly don’t start the meter. Private cars play taxi. The teacher calling in sick to serve as interpreter for foreigners, the cop ignoring the jinetera. Customs officials who don’t inspect the bags of visiting Miami Cubans for forbidden items like computers, books, or satellite dishes.

Clandestine bars, restaurants, rooms by the hour or day, tourist “guides,” hookers—all are doing booming, illegal business in hard currency. “‘Black market’ does not have the connotation we give it back home,” says one Canadian living in Havana. “In Toronto, we think drugs or hot stereos, but here, someone says, ‘Psst! Wanna buy potatoes?’ ”

Because money fuels individualism—and that’s anti-revolutionary and seditious in Cuba’s official books—many say the introduction of the dollar marked the beginning of the end of the Castro regime. Oscar Espinosa Chepe, an economist and dissident, told me before he, too, was arrested in the March roundup, that so-called dollarization has divided Cuba into haves and have-nots. “If you are an honest party member, you are poor,” he says. “If you have an uncle in Miami, or take your clothes off for tourists, you are rich. That is quite removed from the initial, revolutionary ideal.”

A maid, a whore, a potato smuggler are much richer than a teacher paid 400 pesos—US$16—a month. Back to black marketeers Peter and Ernie. Peter used to teach Russian—not a hot subject nowadays—and Ernie was a technician. Cuba’s self-congratulatory education system has produced tens of thousands of such skilled workers who now work in the alternate economy. Ernesto says: “We have been promised a shining future for too long. Now we are just longing for The Change.”
In Havana, no one ever mentions the name of Castro in public, or says he wishes the president would die soon. Instead, people casually refer to waiting for The Change—and it is understood that The Change will not happen until the Lider Maximo, now 76, joins Lenin, Stalin, and Che, wherever they may be.

How does one bring change in a self-proclaimed revolutionary, but totalitarian, regime? “We go about it by peaceful means,” answers Oswaldo Payá, currently the most famous of Cuban dissidents—which explains why he was spared in the March sweep.

Payá is the leader of the Varela Project, a petition making the rounds in Cuba, demanding such rights as freedom of association, freedom of the press, and free elections. Despite a blackout in the media and systematic police obstruction, the petition has made progress all over the island. “We know the majority of citizens secretly wants change,” Payá says. “Now, thousands have...signed their names on a public document.” Payá said this during an interview days before the March sweep. Now, most of his supporters are behind bars.

Change, Payá had added, will come about without social disruption only if it happens alongside a process of national reconciliation. “Remember,” he says, “that each Cuban family has one member in the Communist Party and one in exile, one black marketeer, and one dissident or political prisoner.”

Reconciliation has become the keyword, and signs of it have started coming from an unexpected source: the angry, influential community of exiles in Florida. Recent opinion polls there suggest that, for the first time, a majority of Cuban-Americans thinks Cubans should sort out their own future, rather than sending in the Marines.

According to many Cuban dissidents, Castro wants to see the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba maintained. “The embargo was a mistake by the Americans,” said Espinosa Chepe. “It has become Castro’s alibi to justify the repression, and his economic failure.”

Before the arrests, many investors and diplomats familiar with Cuba said that the notion of a peaceful transition to a sort of state-run capitalism, in a more open democracy, was being upgraded from mere objective to distinct possibility. Many were betting on it, investing the time and energy to establish networks that would be ready to kick into action when Cuba rejoined Spaceship Earth. But the sweep of the dissidents has put a damper on their hopes—not much business is happening at the moment, they say. The Change will have to take place first.
Living in a City Under Siege

Iraqis may fear Saddam, but many have also come to hate Americans

by Alexandre Trudeau in Baghdad
Maclean’s, April 2003

For foreigners who decided to stay behind in Baghdad, life has become more difficult by the day. Alexandre (Sacha) Trudeau, who has been living in the city making a documentary film, was one of those who decided to brave the U.S. bombing. In one of his exclusive reports for Maclean's, Trudeau, a Montreal-based filmmaker, tells of spending time with a number of Iraqis as they go about their lives in a city under attack. Trudeau's presence has attracted the attention of the Iraqi secret police, who detained him briefly last week. His report:

BAGHDAD HAS BEEN POUNDED by U.S. bombs for days now. War, especially for civilians, is never what you expect. In a way, what is hardest is that as long as the war is going on, you cannot say what you will be doing tomorrow or in a week because war, unpredictable, uncontrollable, is the master of your fate. For those of us who chose to stay, there is no way out but through the war zone -- a proposition that grows more difficult by the day as the realization sets in that this war will not end quickly. But the longer I'm here the more I realize that facing war is not so much an act of bravery as one of endurance, humour, stoicism and faith.

Iraqis regularly display healthy doses of all those traits, and they are on display when I visit a Baghdad family just as the bombing starts up again. The father calmly fetches a bottle of arak, the Iraqi alcoholic beverage made from rice, and ceremoniously serves himself one drink after another. His elderly father takes out his prayer beads and begins rocking back and forth. His mother and his young daughter escape to the windowless pantry at the back of the house, and spend the raid there, huddled and crying. His wife sits quietly, shaking her head and sighing. The angelic infant son, peacefully and almost smugly sleeps through the whole damned thing.

Partly because the bombing has been focused on Saddam's palaces and military facilities, most essential services are still up and running. And because of the Iraqis' endurance and their spirit, Baghdad slogs on. Bombs or no bombs, things need to get done -- people just can't sit tight in their homes indefinitely.

So my friend, Omar, his mate, Farouk, and I go searching for car parts for Farouk's Brazilian-made Volkswagen Passat. (A large number of cars in Baghdad seem to be Passats.) The best place to get used parts -- especially during a time of war -- is the rambling ghetto, Saddam City, which the locals call "Thora." With nearly two million people, Thora marches to its own beat -- neither war nor Saddam Hussein have much effect on this place. "They work, pray and make babies. That is all that ever happens in Saddam City," says Omar. Many families have more than six children and the streets seem choked with kids. While driving through Thora, you have to be vigilant to avoid not only the potholes, but also the rambunctious toddlers who keep popping up in front of your car.

Farouk is a likeable sort: short, bald and mischievous. He has brought his short-model Kalashnikov along for the ride. Farouk is a member of Saddam's Baath party, working as a transcriber of speeches at headquarters. Baath men have taken up the defence both of Baghdad
and of their leader, and these days they are always armed. Omar, on the other hand, is the furthest thing in the world from the Baath party. He truly hates politics, and all the more the severe, sectarian club which is the Baath.

Whatever chance he gets, he teases Farouk about his allegiances. But these two are drinking buddies and have known each other for so long that nothing between them is sacred -- not religion, not politics. As we drive, the radio blasts a hawkish, monotonous speech from an Iraqi defence ministry hack who is announcing all the (fictitious) victories against the Americans in the battles of the south, and declaring that it is only a matter of time before the invaders are cast out of Iraq. Farouk nods and, suddenly unable to contain himself, cries out: "Inshallah!" -- if Allah wills it. Omar winks at me sarcastically. Farouk then lifts up his weapon and chants a pro-Saddam slogan. Omar answers with a big, decisive raspberry. We all burst out laughing.

PART OF THE DEFENCE of Baghdad, part of the drama, are the massive oil pits that the Iraqi army has constructed on the outskirts. When lit, they fill the sky with thick smoke in a bid to prevent the attackers from pinpointing the location of Iraqi troops and other targets. Under this gloomy veil, Baghdad is bathed in an eerie, yellowish light. A middle-class area known as New Baghdad is shrouded in what seem to be the darkest clouds of smoke. There, I visit a comfortable Shia family; with customary Arab warmth and grace, big Hassan, a local merchant, shows me into his home. Snickering, he points to his sons who are busy playing the video game Medal of Honor: an American commando single-handedly machine-gunning his way through hordes of faceless foes.

On the wall above them, a not-so-common sight in a private house: a portrait of Saddam. "How do you like the war?" Hassan asks me with a smile. "Very strange," I inadequately answer. "You just wait," he says. I don't know what he means, but I can't help but think of the mantra, "We are not afraid," which I have heard countless Iraqis utter over and over before and since the bombing began.

THESE DAYS, there are ghosts in the capital. In an echo of Gen. Tommy Franks's claim that American agents are already operating in and around Baghdad, many in the city are anxious to catch a spy. In one surreal episode, hundreds of police and soldiers scour the banks of the Tigris River for two U.S. pilots they believe have been shot down over the city. Later, in New Baghdad, a man tells me an Iranian, posing as an Iraqi soldier, has been caught. "We could tell he wasn't Iraqi by the boots he was wearing," the man says. "What happened to him?" I inquire. "The knife," he answers bluntly. Then Farouk reports that an American has been captured in the Daura neighbourhood. "They turned him in dead," Farouk says grimly. "That's worth 25 million dinar [$12,500]. Alive, the enemy soldiers are worth 50 million dinar [$25,000]." Then Omar adds dryly, "If the Americans ever pay for Iraqi soldiers, I will turn in Farouk."

Foreigners in the city are increasingly under suspicion as the war grinds on. As I sit in a restaurant in a remote part of Baghdad, casually eating a sandwich, I'm pounced upon by some Baath heavies. Before long, policemen and soldiers are interrogating me. I'm carted off to an imposing, grey-haired secret police boss, standing like a Titan in front of his station. "Where were you when you were caught?" he roars, looking me up and down. "In a restaurant," I answer meekly. "What were you doing?" he demands. "Having lunch," I reply. He pauses, then bursts
out in thunderous laughter. "Get out of here," he shouts with a huge smile. I scramble off -- happy to have had the experience, relieved to have come out of it unscathed.

Perhaps I was released because police loyal to Saddam in Baghdad have been buoyed by the news that the U.S. advance toward the city has been slowed. It's not the cakewalk the Americans were counting on. Rather than giving up and greeting their would-be liberators with jubilation, many Iraqi soldiers and militiamen are actually shooting at them. The invaders can expect even more resistance when they reach the city, where a large number of gunmen of all sorts are digging in: Baath soldiers, the paramilitary Fedayeen troops loyal to Saddam's son Uday, the Republican Guard and armed civilians.

I don't think Iraqis themselves were aware until recently how they would react to this war. Now, more and more know. Their sense of endurance, which allows them to laugh and live under the bombs, might well be put to harsher purposes. Miriam, an amazing woman I met who speaks perfect English, hints at what may come. Her father is a scientist; Miriam, who was a teacher and is now married with children, spent part of her teenage years in the United States when he was doing post-doctoral research.

While having lunch at her house, we hear on the radio that an American Apache helicopter has been shot down about 80 km south of Baghdad. "Good," Miriam proclaims. "I am not going to shed any tears for Saddam's palaces. But I will shed even less for American attack helicopters." She continues: "It is not about the president, not about the regime. It is about our pride. This is our country." Farouk expresses this sentiment in even stronger terms. "We are fighting for the Iraqi soul," he says. "Of course we will put up a great fight."
Towards the end of the 1800s as the Jewish people were facing more persecution and anti-Semitism in Europe, there were questions as to how the Jewish people can overcome this. The biblical Promised Land led to a political movement, Zionism, to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

From 1920 to 1947, the British Empire had a mandate over Palestine. At that time, Palestine included all of Israel and today's Occupied Territories, of Gaza, West Bank, etc. The increasing number of Jewish people immigrating to the "Holy Land" increased tensions in the region. European geopolitics in the earlier half of the 20th century in the wider Middle East region contributed to a lot of instability overall. The British Empire, especially, played a major role in the region.

During World War I, in 1916, it convinced Arab leaders to revolt against the Ottoman Empire (which was allied with Germany). In return, the British government would support the establishment of an independent Arab state in the region, including Palestine. Yet, in contradiction to this, and to also get support of Jewish people, in 1917, Lord Arthur Balfour, then British Foreign Minister, issued a declaration (the Balfour Declaration). This announced the British Empire's support for the establishment of "a Jewish national home in Palestine."

As a further complication, there was a deal between Imperial Britain and France to carve up the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire and divide control of the region. The spoils of war were to be shared. As in 1885 in the Berlin Conference where Africa was carved up amongst the various European empires, parts of the Middle East were to also be carved up, which would require artificial borders, support of monarchies, dictators and other leaders that could be regarded as "puppets" or at least could be influenced by these external powers.

After World War II, the newly formed United Nations (which then had less developing countries as members) recommended the partition of Palestine into two states and the internationalization of Jerusalem. The minority Jewish people received the majority of the land. The State of Israel was proclaimed on May 14 1948, but the Arab states rejected the partition of Palestine and the existence of Israel. The armies of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Trans-Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt attacked but were defeated by the Israeli army.

While the Jewish people were successful in creating their homeland, there was no Palestine and no internationalization of Jerusalem, either. In 1948 for example, Palestinians were driven out of the new Israel into refugee camps in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and other regions. At least 750,000 people are said to have been driven out (or ethnically cleansed, as some have described it). However, this aspect is not usually mentioned by mainstream media when recounting various historical events.

In 1956, Britain, France and Israel invaded the Sinai peninsula after Egypt nationalized the Suez canal due to fears of loss of a major economic trading route entry point for the West to the rest of the Middle East. While Egypt was defeated, international (US, really) pressure forced their withdrawal.

In 1967, Israel simultaneously attacked Egypt, Syria and Jordan in a "pre-emptive strike" against the Arab troops along its borders. Israel captured key pieces of land, such as the strategic Golan Heights to the north on the border with Syria, to the West Bank from Jordan and the Gaza strip from Egypt. In fact,
Israel more than doubled its size in the six days that this war took place. Since then, negotiations have been around returning land to pre-1967 states, as required by international law and UN resolutions.

In 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur to attempt to regain their lost land, but failed.

In 1978, the Camp David accords were signed between Israel, Egypt and the US, and Israel returned Sinai back to Egypt in return for peace between them. To many in the Arab world, Egypt had sold out to US pressure. To the US and Israel, this was a great achievement; Egypt was obviously not to be underestimated in its capabilities, so the best thing would be to ensure it is an ally, not an adversary.

Also in 1978, due to rising Hizbollah attacks from South Lebanon, where many Palestinian refugees still were, Israel attacked and invaded Lebanon. In 1982, Israel went as far up Lebanon as Beirut, as bloody exchanges followed between Israeli attempts to bomb Yasser Arafat's PLO locations, and Hizbollah retaliations. In 1985, Israel declared a strip of South Lebanon to be a Security Zone (never recognized by the UN, and hence Israel was always occupying this other nation.) Many civilians were killed on both sides. Israeli forces were accused of massacres on many occasions. After 22 years, Israel withdrew in May 2000. One of the leading Israeli military personnel was Sharon.

In the late 1980s came the Palestinian uprising -- the Intifada. While there was much of a non-violence movement initially, the mainstream media concentrated on the violence. Young Palestinians confronted Israeli troops with nothing more than sling shots and stones. Thousands were killed by the Israeli military. Many suicide activists killed Israeli soldiers and caused other damage. Many innocent civilians were killed on both sides.

1993 saw the Oslo Peace Accord, whereby Israel recognized the PLO and gave them limited autonomy in return for peace and an end to Palestinian claims on Israeli territory. This has been largely criticized as a one-sided accord that benefits only Israel, not the Palestinian people. It resulted in Israeli control of land, water, roads and other resources.

In 1994, Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip and Jericho, ending twenty seven years of occupation. A Palestinian police force replaced them. In 1995, then Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, who had been involved in the latest peace processes, was assassinated by a Jewish extremist.

In April 1996, Israeli forces bombed Lebanon for 17 days, with Hizbollah retaliating by firing upon populated areas of Northern Israel. Israel also shelled a UN shelter killing about 100 out of 800 civilians sheltering there. The UN claimed it was intentional.

October 1998 sees the Wye River Memorandum outlining some Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank but Israel suspends it in January 1999 due to internal disagreements on its implementation. Further attempts through to the beginning of 2000 are made at continuing the Wye River accord, but keep breaking down due to Palestinian protests of continued new Israeli settlements.

Camp David summit in 2000 fails to come up with solutions on Jerusalem. Ariel Sharon's visit to the Mount Temple sparks of the current round of protests and violence.

In all this time then, the Palestinian people have been without any nation, and have had limited rights, while suffering from poverty at the same time. Israel continued to increase and expand their settlements giving up less and less land compared to what was promised. Many Palestinians (that are not Israeli Arabs since 1948) do not have the right to vote, or have limited rights, while paying full taxes. For over 3 decades, the Palestinian people have been living under a military occupation.
The Palestinian National Authority, which Arafat headed with a police force armed by the Israelis, has itself been criticized for not serving the full interests of the Palestinian people. The police have been harsh on cracking down on some Palestinians, to the extent that it has drawn criticisms from the likes of Amnesty International and others.

The frustration and injustice of the treatment of Palestinians has angered many citizens in the Arab world against US/Israeli policies. Palestinian frustration has spilled into extremism in some cases as well. Many militant groups from Palestine and other areas of the Middle East have therefore sprung up in recent years as well as past decades, performing acts of what the West and Israel describe as terrorism and what the groups themselves justify as freedom fighting (though achieving freedom through terrorist actions could arguably still be called terrorist organizations, despite claimed motives). Suicide bombings, and past acts of terrorism have terrorized Israeli civilians, making peace harder and harder to imagine, yet it has been easy to influence and recruit the young, impressionable and angry into extremist causes. As violence continues, it seems that it will remain easy to find recruits to violent causes.

U.S. involvement in the Middle East has also been seen as a critical issue. The U.S. and West's interests in the region had been due to oil. Strong military and financial support of Israel lends well to a powerful ally in the region. (For that reason as well, other Arab dictators and corrupt rulers have also been supported and even helped into power. Saddam Hussein is one of them. Dictators that can be bought provide a useful check against possible popular uprising in the region and therefore, for the US ensure their "security" -- that is, their "national interests" are safeguarded and local puppets profit, while the people of the region end up suffering and losing out.

While the UN Security Council has attempted to pass numerous resolutions critical of Israel the United States has vetoed almost all of them. Nevertheless, there have been some resolutions demanding that Israel return land that was captured in the 1967 war, etc. The 1948 UN Resolution 181 allowed for both Jews and Arabs to live in Israel, which goes counter to claims of some groups that Israel should not exist. Often the international community is critical of Israeli inaction, but the US veto prevents anything coming of it. Instead, Israeli land expansion and settlements have continued. The US has also provided Israel with enormous military aid, to the extent that in the Middle East, Israel has the most advanced and superior military. Their high tech/military industries are also very advanced. Israel also has nuclear weapons capabilities.

An additional source of frustration for the Palestinian people is that the land that is being settled by Israelis are usually prime land, and hence the various peace negotiations usually leave Palestine with the less usable land. Israel also thereby controls water sources. The non-contiguous land (Gaza and West Bank) and the Israeli control over Palestinian movement also means disconnection. This allows the possibility of providing cheap labor to Israel, so it is in their economic interest to pursue this type of division. The mainstream western media has traditionally capitalized on negative imagery and propaganda against Islam and the Arab world as a sort of way to also justify continued presence and involvement there.
Kosovo:

Did NATO really act out of Humanitarian Concerns?

By Anup Shah

The NATO bombings were justified on the grounds of "humanitarian" concerns. Other false assumptions and even what could be considered as hypocritical arguments were used to justify the necessity of the aggression (this last link has a good account on the legal ramifications of the crisis given NATO's illegal actions, as well as a look into the humanitarian actions, thus suggesting some hypocrisy). Yet, the mainstream media accepted this without much analysis, or scrutiny.

Double standards seem to be apparent again. There are many other regions around the world where even hundreds of thousands of people have been killed or displaced yet we see passivity from the US there, but not here. (I mention the US here as they are the most influential country and have had the ability to similarly "intervene" in other countries where similar atrocities are being committed - even if it is a country seen as an ally, like Indonesia, Turkey, pre-1990 Iraq, etc.)

There are numerous countries that have been involved in, or contributed to, similar, or even worse atrocities. In some nations these violations are still occurring, or have occurred in the recent past. However, most of these have been largely, perhaps even hypocritically, ignored compared to the Kosovo crisis, while also presenting a strong case for "humanitarian intervention". They include:

- Algeria
- Chechnya/Russia
- Colombia,
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Ethiopia
- India/Pakistan
- Indonesia/East Timor
- Israel
- Rwanda
- Spain/Basque Region
- Tibet/China
- Turkey
- United Kingdom/Northern Ireland
- United States

While Serbia was being bombed by NATO there was not much support of the fleeing refugees in Kosovo. The destruction of civilian infrastructure by NATO bombing, which violated international law was also not humanitarian. (Just a few months later, worse atrocities were taking place, in East Timor. Yet, none of the rhetoric about a new order and a new humanitarian
cause has been invoked by the major leaders. Even in NATO member Turkey's own land, terrible atrocities still occur without any intense complaints from other NATO members.)

So what would the message be to all those nations who are cracking down in some way their own people or neighbors? That they will face NATO attacks and bombardment? Probably not. Perhaps something more like, if they step out of line with US/NATO interests, then they will face bombardment and destruction, otherwise they can continue as normal because US/NATO do not care what they do in their own back yard.

Shortly after the Kosovo crisis ended, the Clinton Administration came out with the "Clinton doctrine". This doctrine basically stated that the United States would forcefully intervene to prevent human rights abuses when it can do so without suffering substantial casualties, without the authority of the UN Security Council.

"Tony Blair is a young man I like very much," Mr Mandela said. "But I am resentful about the type of thing that America and Britain are doing. They want now to be the policemen of the world and I'm sorry that Britain has joined the US in this regard. It's a totally wrong attitude. They must persuade those countries like China or Russia who threaten to veto their decisions at the UN. They must sit down and talk to them. They can't just ignore them and start their own actions."

“Mandela accuses ‘policeman’ Britain”, in an interview with the Guardian, April 5, 2000.

This is a pretty serious precedent for a powerful country to set as it in effect undermines international law and treaty obligations. The US has in the past been extremely selective in the determination of where humanitarian intervention (or even just concern) is needed. Allies of the US have often been gross human rights violators, but those abuses have been conveniently ignored by the US to be able to pursue its national interests (i.e. economic liberalization of other nations, ensuring resources that the US needs remain as cheap as practically possible and so on). In some regions, the US continues to provide arms to allies that use them to commit gross violations of human rights (and that in effect, helps the US pursue its national interests. After all, why else would they knowingly support human rights violators?).

"Without the authority of the UN Security Council" basically implies another step to undermine the UN. It should be noted that the UN does have its flaws which need to be addressed (for example, the U.N. Security Council, plus the idea of 5 permanent (nuclear) members of the Council, is not exactly very democratic). However, it also is the main international body set up to promote universal human rights.

The US was key in helping set it up shortly after the second World War. Various UN treaties and charters, one of which is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the US has signed, form parts of international law which all member states are bound to. So, to "prevent human rights abuses" by by-passing the United Nations suggests that the definition of human rights which the US wishes to uphold is different to what they helped create and sign. It also suggests that the US has other motives when it will choose to intervene.
Nuclear Arms for Deterrence or Fighting?

By Michael Gordon

LONDON, March 10, 2002 - The Pentagon's new blueprint on nuclear forces has raised the question whether the Bush administration is lowering the threshold for using nuclear arms. In its Nuclear Posture Review, the Pentagon cites the need for new nuclear arms that could have a lower yield and produce less nuclear fallout. The weapons, the Pentagon said, could be designed to destroy underground complexes, including stores of chemical and biological arms. The targets might be situated in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya or North Korea, a reorientation away from cold war scenarios involving Russia. But the classified Pentagon review has ignited a new and vitally important nuclear debate. Unlike much of the arms-control discussions in recent years, this dispute is not over the number of weapons the United States needs; it is over the more fundamental issue of the circumstances in which they might be used.

Should the purpose of nuclear weapons in a post-cold-war world be essentially to deter a nuclear attack on the United States? Or should nuclear weapons be developed for fighting wars, including conflicts with non-nuclear adversaries? Critics fear that by calling for the development of more effective nuclear weapons, the Pentagon is making the unthinkable thinkable, blurring the distinction between nuclear weapons and conventional arms. The reaction overseas to the policy shift was predictably harsh, with a Russian legislator asking if Americans "have somewhat lost touch with the reality in which they live."

"Throughout the nuclear age, the fundamental goal has been to prevent the use of nuclear weapons," said Ivo Daalder, a foreign policy specialist at the Brookings Institution. "Now the policy has been turned upside down. It is to keep nuclear weapons as a tool of war-fighting rather than a tool of deterrence. If military planners are now to consider the nuclear option any time they confront a surprising military development, the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons fades away."

The Pentagon, for its part, argues that in a world full of unexpected threats and rogue states, it needs a broader array of options. It describes nuclear and non-nuclear weapons as "offensive strike systems" that can be used separately or combined in an attack. Such systems are a key pillar of a "new triad" of offensive, defensive and military-industrial resources.

"Composed of both non-nuclear systems and nuclear weapons, the strike element of the new triad can provide greater flexibility in the design and conduct of military campaigns to defeat opponents decisively," the review says. "Non-nuclear strike capabilities may be particularly useful to limit collateral damage and conflict escalation. Nuclear weapons could be employed against targets able to withstand non-nuclear attack (for example, deep underground bunkers or bio-weapons facilities). Nuclear and non-nuclear strike systems can attack an enemy's war-making capabilities and thus contribute to the defeat of the adversary and the defense of the United States and its security partners." The review, though not a contingency plan for actual use of nuclear weapons, is meant to guide decisions about their role, development and deployment over the next decade.
Throughout the cold war, nuclear weapons had an enormous role in American military planning. The Pentagon not only built a formidable strategic arsenal to deter a nuclear attack on the United States; it also reserved the right to use nuclear weapons to deter a Warsaw Pact attack on Europe. The Pentagon deployed a vast array of nuclear arms, from ocean-spanning missiles to nuclear mines and depth charges. The Kremlin did much the same. But as the cold war waned, so did the notion that nuclear weapons could be used to fight a war. The United States and Russia withdrew their tactical nuclear weapons from Europe and from their fleets. While Washington did not formally give up its option to make the first use of nuclear weapons against a Warsaw Pact attack, it cast the use of such weapons as a last resort.

With the end of the cold war, the need for nuclear weapons seemed to fade further. Arms control advocates pushed for radical cuts in the American and Russian arsenals and for taking nuclear-tipped missiles off alert, though hard-liners insisted that there was still a need for nuclear arms.

With the Nuclear Posture Review, President Bush appears to have a foot in each camp. He has embraced the call for deeper cuts in strategic arms, though the reductions he is seeking are probably not much deeper than the Clinton administration had in mind when changes in procedures for counting nuclear weapons are taken into account. But Mr. Bush's Pentagon has also pushed for new and more usable nuclear weapons. At same time, it is working hard to improve conventional weapons. In effect, the Pentagon is urging the development of an arsenal in which nuclear weapons could be used against an adversary's non-nuclear forces, while promoting the development of conventional arms that could be used against nuclear targets. The potential blurring of those roles, critics fear, would eliminate the firebreak between nuclear and conventional war. Some specialists also argue that it sends a message to third world powers that nuclear weapons are militarily useful.

"By emphasizing the important role of nuclear weapons, the Pentagon is encouraging other nations to think that it is important to have them as well," said Robert S. Norris, a nuclear weapons expert at the Natural Resources Defense Council. Today, senior Bush administration officials sought to dampen the criticism. They argued that the Nuclear Posture Review was a mere policy document, not an operational plan, and that the decision to develop dramatically new types of weapons had not yet been made.

"This is prudent military planning, and it is the kind of planning I think the American people would expect," Secretary of State Colin Powell said on the CBS News Program "Face the Nation," adding, "We are not developing brand new nuclear weapons, and we are not planning to undergo any testing." Vice President Dick Cheney, who arrived in London late tonight at the beginning of a long tour of allied nations, "will put it in context and in perspective," Secretary Powell said. The Pentagon review, however, clearly points to important changes by touting the need for new variable-yield or reduced-yield nuclear weapons, and improved targeting systems so they could be rapidly used in war.

"Greater flexibility is needed with respect to nuclear force and planning than was the case during the cold war," the review said. "Nuclear attack options that vary in scale, scope and purpose will complement other military capabilities."
Controversy over Rwanda Tribunal

Jim Lobe, OneWorld
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A coalition of four prominent international human rights groups are pressing the UN Security Council to ensure the independence and impartiality of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), despite indirect pressure by the U.S., Britain, and Secretary General Kofi Annan not to prosecute Rwandan military officials for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In a letter sent Friday to Security Council members, the four groups, including the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (LCHR) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) suggested that proposed changes in administration of the ICTR could make it more difficult to prosecute officers in the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), the rebel force that swept to power in 1994 in the immediate wake of the genocide against ethnic Tutsis committed by senior officials of the previous, Hutu-led government and army.

The U.S. and Britain are reportedly concerned that prosecutions of key RPA officers could weaken the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) government at a moment when Kigali is seen as an important ally in the "war on terrorism" in East Africa and as a check to the radical Islamist government in neighboring Sudan. In its hostility to international tribunals, such as the new International Criminal Court, the Bush administration has also stressed its preference for national courts to try cases involving major human rights abuses.

As many as 1 million people, most of them ethnic Tutsis, were killed in a matter of just three months during the spring and summer of 1994, before the RPA swept to Kigali from bases in Uganda and eastern Rwanda. Hundreds of thousands of Hutus fled the country into neighboring Zaire (since renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo--DRC) ahead of the RPA's advance.

A UN Commission of experts established by the Security Council in July 1994 concluded that some members of the RPA had "perpetrated serious breaches of international humanitarian law" and "crimes against humanity" during the military campaign. Rights groups have also charged the RPA with serious abuses in subsequent counter-insurgency campaigns, although not nearly on the scale of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis.

When the Security Council established the ICTR, it called on the tribunal to prosecute not just the genocide, but also "other systematic, widespread, and flagrant violations of international humanitarian law," including those committed by members of the RPA.

The ICTR, however, has been plagued by management problems since it first got underway in Arusha, Tanzania, in late 1994. Among its problems have been inconsistent leadership, inexperienced attorneys, and the lack of an effective prosecution strategy. These problems, as well as Washington's call for the Court to wind up all of its investigations by September, 2004 and all trials by 2008, have resulted in the latest reform proposals, the most important of which is
to remove the UN's chief war crimes prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, from jurisdiction over the ICTR.

Del Ponte has long been a thorn in the side of the RPF, which has actively resisted investigations of RPA soldiers. In one case, Kigali even imposed restrictions on the travel of witnesses to genocide trials as way of exerting pressure on Del Ponte to suspend her investigation. Last year, Del Ponte appealed to the Security Council to call directly on Rwanda to cooperate.

Annan announced a week ago that he would recommend that she be relieved of her Rwanda responsibilities and retain her responsibility over the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) when her contract comes up for renewal in mid-September. In contrast to the ICTR, the ICTY under her direction has successfully prosecuted individuals from all sides in the series of wars that wracked the former Yugoslavia during most of the 1990s.

"No tears would be shed if the UN Security Council does not renew her mandate," Rwanda's foreign minister, Charles Murigande, told reporters after Annan's announcement.

But Del Ponte has fought back. In a meeting with the Council Saturday, she warned that any separation of the mandates of both tribunals "would seriously undermine (the tribunal's) independence."

"Undue pressures took place to push me to abandon certain investigations," she said in an allusion to her suspension of investigations against RPA officials. "Although I always considered my task as a prosecutor to be outside the scope of politics, I was unfortunately exposed more than I would have liked." But Washington said it intended to introduce a resolution this week that would formally separate the two courts and establish a new prosecutor for Rwanda. The rights groups did not take an explicit position on Del Ponte's tenure, but echoed her concerns about the impact of the proposed recommendations on the court's independence.

"The Security Council should clearly and publicly reaffirm its support for the prosecutor in the execution of his or her duties, including prosecutions of those charged with genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, regardless of their political, ethnic, or national affiliation," they said. "It should make clear that this policy includes members of the RPA."

The groups also noted that Del Ponte had been forced to suspend investigations against RPA soldiers several times, and that despite assurances by Kigali that it had prosecuted or would prosecute soldiers accused of abuses, those "few" cases that were followed up resulted in light sentences at best. Last year, Washington tried to mediate an agreement by which Rwanda would prosecute individuals investigated by the Court, but del Ponte reportedly declined to go along.

"Only one senior officer, a major, has been tried for massacres committed in 1994," the rights groups noted, but, after being sentenced to life in prison for a massacre of more than 30 people to which he confessed, he successfully appealed his sentence and was quickly freed. By mid-1998, five others had been convicted of capital offenses dating back to 1994, but four were privates, only one was a corporal, and all received light sentences. The corporal, for example, was convicted of killing 15 civilians for which he was sentenced to two years in prison.