'Shaping the Choices of Countries at Strategic Cross-roads'

National Defense University
16 March 2005

Adam Ward
Executive Director
The International Institute for Strategic Studies – US
Email: ward@iiss.org

I've been asked to set out the European attitude towards the premises and recommendations of the QDR regarding the subject of shaping the choices of major and emerging powers who find themselves at a 'strategic cross-roads', and who are at risk of briskly marching off in the wrong direction. I will do this at the level of some generality; as a practical matter, there has as yet been no specific, public European reply beyond an occasional nervous twitch here and an approving nod there. I'll therefore be anticipating and imagining the European view more than I will be reporting it to you. On balance, I expect the tone and thrust of the QDR will be treated with some caution and scepticism.

I was also asked to talk briefly about the scope for consensus between Europe and the United States on the question of how best to respond to the challenges hurled before us by China's rise and Iran's nuclear ambitions. Here the prospects are, with a few caveats, generally sound. They are certainly better than they were even quite recently.

Europeans will recognise the broad alterations in the geopolitical scene that the QDR narrates. There is indeed a set of major and emerging powers, principally China and India, whose enlarged economic and political-military presence is being felt regionally and globally. Just as importantly, these powers are striving to escape what had, until relatively recently, been rather narrow, parochial strategic psychologies: they are now becoming more self-aware, conscious of their relative standing in the international system, mindful of their multiplying global interests, and more willing and able to pursue them. The rest

of the international community has, for better or worse, to take greater account of their views and likely behaviour. Then there is a set of smaller aspirant regional powers, such as Iran, that have considerable means to menace, and whose actions threaten not only to unsettle strategic balances in their own immediate regional vicinities, but also to cause tensions between the major powers.

Europeans would, then, agree that the strategic choices of these various powers do need to be shaped to ensure peace and that an open, broadly liberal, rules-bound international system is supported and not subverted. Yet, this is hardly an uncomplicated task even at the best of times. And Europeans, conscious that they lack the comprehensive strength of the United States, are perhaps temperamentally rather more averse to the possible dangers that lie in efforts to embark on such projects in too explicit or forceful a manner.

Any attempt to fashion a set of incentives and disincentives is fraught with well-known risks: diplomacy and deterrence, enticements and compulsions have to be carefully calibrated to achieve desired outcomes; those seeking to do the shaping have to have clear and focused priorities, especially in circumstances where trade-offs between one policy objective and another will probably be required; there will be ample scope for mixed signals and misinterpreted messages; and unintended consequences will always threaten to intrude. Major and emerging powers typically have little wish to be shaped or to have their choices defined by others: classically, it is they that wish to shape and reshape and to enjoy complete freedom of choice and action. Even where broad common interests exist, they do not look upon the predominant power or powers as self-evidently benign; and it is hard for them to develop great enthusiasm for

becoming a stakeholder in a system that, whatever its other, wider benefits, they see as involving their own constraint as an enduring feature.

The task is made no easier for the United States, Europeans might argue, by the sense that, rightly or wrongly, much of the world no longer seems in quite such thrall to American power and example as the rhetoric concerning a 'sole superpower' once suggested. The difficulties of the occupation of Iraq, and the hubristic defiance of Iran and North Korea, have fostered a sense that US power, while enormous in the aggregate, is not configured to dealing with the most probable and immediate challenges, while America's means to persuade and reward, to deter and defeat are in some quarters seemingly taken to be less credible. To others, controversy surrounding the ways in which aspects of the war on terror have been conducted has diluted the traditionally strong political appeal of the US in many parts of the world.

The emphasis that the QDR places on consulting America's allies and friends, and engaging them in 'shaping' efforts, will therefore be seen as entirely proper and necessary. That is not to say that European receptivity will be unqualified, especially where perceptions may differ by degrees – as they will, given the arguably greater European tolerance for ambiguity in assessing threats and the intentions of others, and the greater aversion to the threat and use of force. There will be resistance to any real or imagined efforts by the US to mobilise them in an instrumental manner, and to prematurely align them in inflexible postures against other major powers.

I suspect that, insofar as they have been read in European capitals, the QDR's passages on shaping the strategic choices of major and emerging powers

are in the main likely to have elicited some uncomfortable stirrings. Its terms and language are probably more direct and stark than customary European sensibilities would allow. The QDR stresses the imperative of integrating emerging powers into the international system, but does not devote any space to discussing how this might most efficiently be achieved. The emphasis is placed decidedly on military hedge rather than diplomatic embrace. This preoccupation is entirely understandable in the sense that the QDR is not intended as a diplomatic manual. But so apparently skewed is the focus that the QDR is in danger of being read – wrongly – by certain Europeans but also by the emerging powers themselves as reflecting a 'strategic fatalism' in US policy circles; a view that engagement and diplomacy have only prevaricating functions and marginal effects on the ultimately conflictual strategic intentions of emerging powers. It is likely to be caricatured as the iron first of US power tearing through the threadbare glove of US diplomacy. And to the extent that the QDR details the many measures through which the US military's pre-eminence is to be entrenched (capability upgrades and base-realignments and so forth), there will also be some concern that not enough account is taken of the competitive reactions that precisely such well-advertised efforts are likely to inspire among emerging powers, much in the manner of a traditional security dilemma.

****

Quibble as they might, many Europeans would concede that there is no particular evidence of greater coherence on their own side regarding these matters. While Europe's strategic mindset is now more extrovert than before, the collective

capacity to shape the choices of others is still circumscribed by a largely disaggregated foreign policy infrastructure, and rather patchy military means. There is no regularised effort in Europe as a whole to set out strategy and align it with capabilities in ways comparable to the terms of reference of the QDR – although such processes are attempted at the national level. Europeans still have difficulty settling on a hierarchy of threats and on the means to deal with them. The European Security Strategy of 2003 made a refreshingly cogent attempt to get to grips with some of these issues, and the aspiration for elaborating common foreign and defence policies remains in place. But both are subject to scepticism and prevarication. In the area of defence capabilities, meanwhile, the problems of chronic underinvestment and the lack of meaningful expeditionary capacities, which in turn raise questions about the plausibility of future interoperability with the United States military, are well known. None of these problems will be remedied in the immediate future. American policymakers will therefore find not only that many of the premises of their 'shaping' strategy will tend to be queried on a case by case basis, but that European responsiveness to appeals to develop the military capabilities to back them up will be episodic and patchy.

This does not mean, however, that the United States has any less incentive to engage Europe in efforts to shape the choices of emerging powers. What military means of persuasion Europe lacks are to some extent compensated for by its command of economic power and diplomatic clout – assets that should not be neglected. If anyone doubts this, they need only look at the concessions – in terms of political and economic reform – that the EU has been able to extract

from states that wish to join or come into association with it (including quite large ones, like Turkey).

The United States will also have to be mindful of the potential for European inertia – whether it is motivated by different perspectives, or simply a failure by Europe to bestir itself in the face of a threat – to undermine American 'shaping' efforts by providing emerging powers with room for manoeuvre and useful insulation against US pressure. In either instance, the need for strategic dialogues in which the US and Europe can arrive at common or complimentary policies is self-evident. Happily, in the case of Iran and China, these do exist, and perspectives broadly converge.

The view of Iran staked out by the British government, and which resonates throughout Europe, is couched precisely in terms of Tehran disappearing into the wrong strategic direction. Its nuclear antics are completely rejected, and are seen as part of a much broader pattern of retrograde steps to constrict political freedoms, stoke inter-religious tensions, sponsor terrorism and fuel regional antagonisms. Few in US policy circles would dissent from this assessment, and cooperation has definitely improved.

But there are some senses in which the Europeans regard themselves as having distinctive views about Iran:

- There is a greater sense that Tehran's pursuit of a nuclear capability above all reflects a wish to acquire international standing and

regional influence, rather than any definite and immediate hostile intent.

- Having had greater contact with Iranian society over recent years, they feel more aware strands of thinking within Iranian society and its political system, and of the possibly counterproductive responses which different forms of pressures can produce in Iran.

- Within the context of the UN Security Council, there is a strong European preference for a gradual, escalatory approach that would not only have better prospects of keeping a reluctant China and Russia on board, but also allow scope for Iran to climb down before the stakes grow too great. Even so, European capitals have been much more clear than Beijing or Moscow that the UN process cannot be too gentle, since Iran might feel itself able to weather a series of weak resolutions.

- Europeans have done more to downplay the prospects for military action against Tehran than Washington probably thinks is tactically astute. Although European powers recognise that keeping military options on the table might concentrate the minds of Iran's diplomats, there is also a concern that it may simply confirm the rationale for Iran acquiring a deterrent, while also alienating Russia and China – not to mention European public opinion.

But these are matters of emphasis and degree: no one in Europe needs to be persuaded of the danger to regional stability and the non-proliferation regime that an Iranian nuclear breakout would entail. And the Europeans are as aware as the Americans that beyond the task of shaping Iran's choices in favour of compliance with its international obligations, they are faced with a litmus test concerning their ability to persuade China and Russia to acquiesce to responsible international policies.

To have serious prospects for success, the US and Europe will have to be prepared to intimate to Moscow and Beijing that this is a benchmark against which the overall state of their relations will be measured. At issue will be whether that message, when and if it comes, is strong and credible enough to outweigh the narrower national interest calculations that China and Russia are making.

Clearly, if the United States and Europe fail in this enterprise, the future dynamics of the Security Council will be affected very much for the worse over the long term, and Iran will regard itself as substantially off the hook. European capitals have yet to fully prepare for the possibility of such a failure, but it seems reasonable to assume hat they would be willing to take steps to punish and isolate Iran, and on a precautionary basis to strengthen defence ties with its neighbours in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. But there will be little appetite for military action.

Implausible though it would have seemed even a year ago, there is now a good degree of convergence in US and European perspectives towards China as an actor in global security affairs. Someone once said that whereas the US is concerned about the implications of China's success, Europe was more preoccupied by the consequences that would flow from its failure. Certainly, in the traditional European view, China was seen as a large developing country beset by internal problems that threatened to effervesce into international ones and thus required attention and help. It was also seen through a narrow economic lens: member states jockeyed for commercial advantage, while, at the EU level, the Commission dealt overwhelmingly with trade and investment issues, not being functionally equipped to address anything else.

There was patchy familiarity with security issues regarding China and little interest in or understanding of America's attachment to Taiwan. Diffidence towards such issues in some quarters, and resentment in others about perceived US efforts to exclude Europe strategically from Asia, mingled confusingly with a degree of relief about the free-rider opportunities that American regional engagement of Asia offered.

There was, and still is, great receptivity to notions of China's 'peaceful rise', although of late more regard has been given to the possibility that such doctrines simply articulate a Chinese strategy for acquiring great power rank, rather than promising anything meaningful about China's long-term intentions. Finally, there was been a tendency to regard American assessments of China as too shrill and conspiratorial; certainly US claims about rapid advances in Chinese military capabilities tended to be seen in that light.

If Europe has not exactly undergone a Damascene conversion to the American point of view, insofar as there is a single view, then at least there have been notable adjustments. This process was precipitated by the transatlantic dispute over the proposed repeal of the EU arms embargo, which cast a spotlight on many of issues and forced European governments and EU institutions to develop and defend policy positions. In this process, it has become apparent that the foundations of the 'strategic partnership' that China and the EU espouse is not nearly as firm as had been imagined or pretended in Brussels and Beijing. China's proliferation practices, its opposition to the democratisation agenda, its perceived subversion of good governance programmes in Africa all came more sharply into view, just as Europe found itself being lectured by China's neighbours about their security concerns. Most recently, the sense has grown that China might pose an economic threat as much as an economic opportunity to Europe.

Europe is moving towards a more rounded view of China. It will not be identical to that of the US, but it will provide a broader basis for cooperation in handling relations with Beijing:

- There will in particular be a willingness to hedge as well as to engage, provided that the hedge is not too blatant.

- Europe will be more inclined to introduce the principle of reciprocity into its dealings with China; this will mark a departure from the previous habit of making somewhat obsequious symbolic

gestures and undertaking other 'acts of kindness' in order to come into good standing with Beijing, while asking nothing particular in return. The EU arms embargo's proposed repeal was just the most egregious example of this tendency.

- Greater regard will also be given to the fact that Asia is patently a region of several large powers, not one, and that there are risks for Europe in appearing to place all its eggs into the Chinese basket. Europe shows increasing awareness that India and Japan will assess their relations with the EU to a large degree in the light of how Brussels conducts its relations with Beijing. And Europe has an increasing incentive to signal to China that it understands and is willing to exploit these regional dynamics.

China has in recent years appeared willing to exhibit flexibility in order to avert band-wagoning alignments against it. The shift in Europe's position in theory provides further scope for shaping China's behaviour in constructive ways. The attitude China ultimately strikes over Iran's nuclear programme will provide one answer to that proposition.

****