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Chinese Views of the US War in Iraq: Unipolarity vs. Unipolarity-Multipolarity

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Two contending views have emerged in the Chinese interpretation of the US war in Iraq – the unipolarity (*danji*) view and the uni-multi-polarity (*yichao duoqiang*) view. This reading, gleaned from the commentaries by civilian and military analysts published in the Chinese media and journals, provides insights into the conceptual dynamic that drives Chinese foreign policy.

The unipolarity view assumes that the US victory in Iraq has further consolidated the US dominant position in the world, which is not likely to be seriously challenged in the near future. The unipolarity-multipolarity view, however, argues that though the US has entrenched itself as the dominant power, this dominance is not absolute. There will be significant constraints, both internal and external, on the exercise of this power and the prospect for multipolarity is good in the long run.

The two contending views have been reflected in the Chinese discussion of the implications of the war for major issues of international politics. These issues range from US domestic politics, the new geostrategic landscape, the reconstruction of Iraq, to the US relations with the UN (United Nations) and major European countries.

Unipolarity view. The unipolarity view, in general, holds that the US victory in Iraq offers an unprecedented opportunity for the US to consolidate its dominant position. In US domestic politics, for instance, unipolarists believe that the US victory would increase the influence of the Bush hawks over foreign policy, and reduce the influence of the Powell moderates. The continued threats of terrorism and WMD (weapons of mass destruction) would also sustain popular support for the Republican Party and its continued control of both the executive and the legislative branches of the government. The US would place more faith in arms, but less in alliances, diplomacy and the UN. This would lead to substantial defence spending increases, which would translate into enhanced homeland defence, more effective missile defence, and improved space-based weapons systems. The enhanced invulnerability in both defence and offense would further reduce the chances of serious challenges to the US military superiority and national security. Moreover, unipolarists maintain that the victory may bring about economic benefits in terms of sales of high-tech arms, stakes in Iraqi oil, lowered oil prices, and contracts for Iraqi reconstruction, and these should translate into political advantages for the incumbents.

Internationally, the unipolarists suggest that the US victory has substantially altered the

geostrategic landscape. US influence in the Middle East, for instance, has been consolidated. States that have been hostile to the US have become more vulnerable, and some, such as Yemen, Sudan, Syria, and Libya may even moderate their anti-American positions. Countries that have been friendly to the US, such as Saudi-Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, would become more so, and some may embark on domestic reforms. The influence of Israel would be strengthened, and that of Turkey and Saudi-Arabia decline. The leverages of France, Germany, and Russia in the region, however, would be reduced. It is going to be very difficult to find another anti-American leader in the region, such as Saddam Hussein. Some unipolarists argue that the US interventionist policy may not necessarily be a bad thing, and may bring about important benefits. Such benefits include the downfall of tyrannical regimes, curtailing religious fundamentalism and terrorism and proliferation of WMD, stabilizing oil prices, and enhancing regional security and stability that would have otherwise been disrupted by ambitious regional powers.

Though optimistic about Iraqi reconstruction, the unipolarists acknowledge that ethnic and religious tension and division may render this difficult. However, they suggest that such tension and division may be mitigated and even overcome by the seemingly strong Iraqi nationalism, sustained by a higher literacy rate, a more secular culture and more moderate practice of Islam, and the potential wealth that comes with oil.

On the UN, the unipolarists believe that Saddam Hussein should also be held accountable for the two Gulf wars for violating the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, and for restricting the UN Security Council-authorized weapons inspections. Moreover, they believe that the tension between the US and the UN would be gradually resolved. Following the US victory the anti-war coalition may dissolve, largely because the humanitarian sufferings in Iraq make it morally difficult to argue against lifting UN sanctions, and because the US would introduce new initiatives that may accommodate the vested economic interests of France and Russia, and incorporate the “important role” that the UN can play in the reconstruction of Iraq.

On US relations with major European countries, the unipolarists are skeptical about the view that the relations were damaged beyond repair. Some argue that there is no fundamental difference between the US and major European countries over values and goals regarding Iraq. What they disagree over is mainly the means and the uneven distribution of cost and benefits. Thus, it is more likely that both sides would draw lessons and make adjustments, and become more accommodating of each other’s core interests in future dealings.

Unipolarity-Multipolarity (UM) view. Unlike the unipolarity view, the UM view tends to stress the challenges and constraints that the exercise of US power may encounter. On US domestic politics, for instance, the UM advocates point out that there has been and will continue to be substantial anti-war and anti-hegemonic voices and forces inside the US that constrains the policy of the hawks. Also, the current policy consensus may not last long, and the camp of hawks and neo-conservatives may eventually fragment. This is because a unilateralist policy and imperial overreach may weaken the alliances, trigger debates about morality and legitimacy of unilateralism, and cause economic downturn due to excessive security and military spending.

Moreover, according to the UM view, the war in Iraq may have brought about serious consequences (*houyizheng*) that may constrain US influence in the Middle East. US military occupation of Iraq may alienate the Arabs and Muslims in the region, trigger more anti-

Americanism and terrorist attacks, and render the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more intractable. Further, reforms of the existing Arab regimes may bring about severe disruption to the deeply rooted social structure and cultural values, generate local resentment and hatred, and undermine the legitimacy of the pro-American governments. The increased vulnerability of the pro-America regimes may lead to their overthrow by the forces of populism and religious fundamentalism, and undercut US influence further. Finally, the reconstruction of Iraq may be severely complicated by a multitude of religious and ethnic tensions and divisions inside the country. If not managed well, Iraq may turn into another hotbed of terrorism, which would also erode US influence.

On the US relations with the UN, the UM view portrays such relations as being more conflictual than cooperative. It points out that the US use of force in Iraq without UN authorization has alienated most members of the UN Security Council, and cost the US more in terms of legitimacy and burden-sharing. The delay of the war itself shows that the UN can serve to constrain US unilateralism. They further predict more serious contention between the US and other major members over issues such as proving the existence of WMD, sanctions and debts. There are sharp differences over the doctrine of preemption and the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the UN role in reconstruction. They also believe that the UN does have some leverages, particularly its expertise in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions and legitimization.

The UM advocates highlight the dispute between the US and major European countries, noting that the US failure to persuade France, Germany, Russia, and Turkey about the necessity of war led to US diplomatic isolation. The weak legitimacy and lack of allies negatively affected the US military operations, particularly with regard to accessing forward bases and organizing logistics. They further note that even Britain deviated from the US position in advocating a “central role” of the UN in the Iraqi reconstruction. They argue that the mistrust that episode has generated may seriously damage the US relations with Europe. Consequently, the counter-terrorism coalition will be weakened and the US may become less secure. Finally, they suggest that since the US failed to mobilize support of its major allies over the Iraqi war, their support may be also less forthcoming over other crises, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and North Korea.

What are the institutional affiliations of those who advocate the two different views? One can actually find advocates of both views in civilian and military institutions. However, more of the analysts from the civilian institutions, including universities and policy think tanks, seem to favor the unipolarity view. Such analysts include Professor Shi Yinhong of the School of International Relations at the People’s University, and Li Rong, a Middle East specialist at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations. Conversely, many researchers from the military institutions appear to hold the UM view. Among the better known are Professor Jin Yi’nan of the National Defense University, and General Peng Guangqian of the Academy of Military Sciences (Peng however has not questioned the military supremacy of the US).

Implications. The implication of the unipolarity view for Chinese foreign policy is quite clear: Chinese interest is best served if China does not challenge the US on major issues, because cooperation would reduce the cost of enhancing the Chinese national power. The UM view, on the other hand, implies that if China does not actively employ the forces and opportunities that may constrain the US, its dominance may gradually diminish China’s

freedom of choices and increase its vulnerability and thereby the cost of building up its national power.

Both views may have been factored into the Chinese foreign policy. The unipolarity view, for instance, probably underlies the generally cooperative approach that China has adopted with regard to the US over issues such as terrorism, proliferation of WMD, and North Korea. The UM view, on the other hand, may underlie the Chinese qualifications on these issues (such as countering all types of terrorism, UN authorization, and peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis), China's anti-war position, and the continued military buildup to protect China's purported core interests.

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