forced to ally themselves more closely and openly with Israel's ambitions in the region. These client states do not now possess even a patina of legitimacy. In desperation, Saudi Arabia is pinning its hopes on using its oil wealth to incite an Islamic civil war.

With American forces caught in the Iraqi quagmire, Latin America is breaking free from US hegemony. Governments "unfriendly" to the US have now been established in Peru, Bolivia and Nicaragua, in addition to the growing strength of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela. A leftist victory was missed by a narrow margin in Mexico -- or more likely, stolen. Cuba is demonstrating that it can survive without Castro.

Admittedly, these changes in the political map of Latin America consummate trends that began with the onslaught of neo-liberal policies in the 1980s. Moreover, this time the Latin American resistance is being led or fueled by a resurgent native population eager to overthrow the colonial-settler elite imposed on them since the seventeenth century. Yet, it is doubtful if the United States would have allowed these changes to occur -- or to stand -- if it were not bogged down in Iraq.

Unexpectedly, even Pakistan's servile ruling class is stealthily taking advantage of US troubles. More likely, Islamist elements within the army are ramping up their support for the Taliban resurgence. Once again, the Pashtuns, who had led the jihad against the Soviet occupation, are gearing up for a big fight against the US-led occupation of their country. As Afghanistan slips out of control, Americans will find it harder to sustain their challenge to Russian and Chinese ambitions in Central Asia.

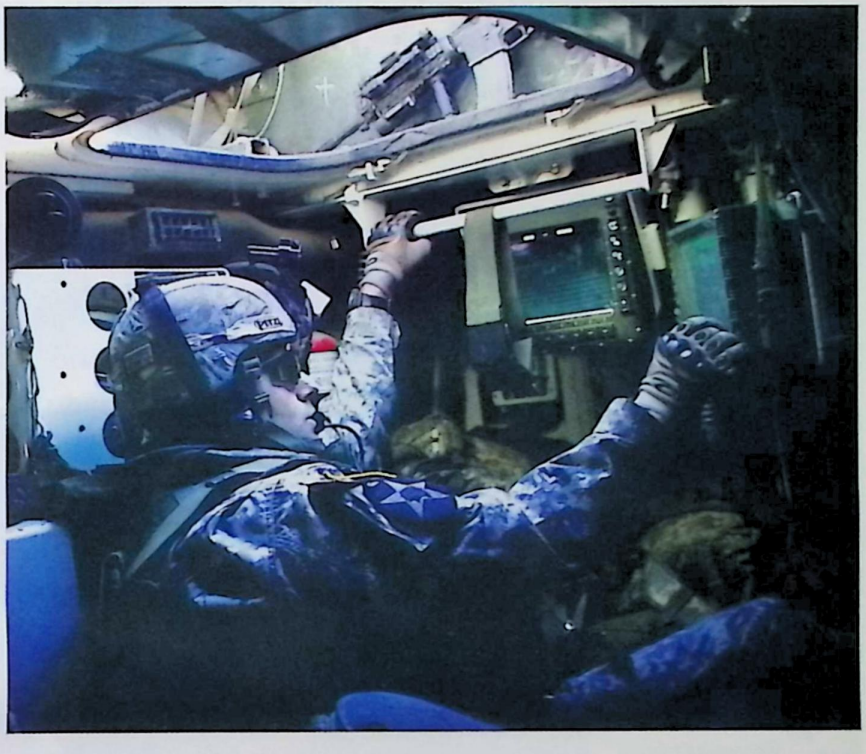
The American loss of prestige in Iraq is taking its toll in Africa too. African rulers are feeling freer to enter into long-range economic relations with China. Rapidly, China is increasing its ownership of a whole range of resources in the African continent, mostly at the cost of positions the US and Europe had built up over centuries. The Chinese have the advantage -- at least now -- of offering economic investments without any political strings. With the attention of the US establishment riveted on Iraqi, Africa is slowly slipping out of America's grasp and moving into the Chinese sphere of influence.

It is doubtful that the US would have rushed into its risky military adventure in the Middle East without the support of Zio-cons. Empires in decline are tempted to shore up their standing with military adventurism. With their superb salesmanship, the Zio-cons sold the Iraq war to the US administration and the American public as a cake-walk, a historic tipping point, and as America's calling in the Middle East. At least for now, Israel is happy to see Iraq disintegrate into chaos, a goal that it has long cherished for the entire Middle East. However, as US losses accumulate, this could easily backfire.

Even if the war's human toll does not force an early withdrawal of American troops, it is unlikely that the Iraqi war can be sustained for long. The rising economic costs of the war -- together with ascendancy of the Asian agents, escalating oil price, rising trade deficits, and sliding dollar -- will force the US to reconsider its posture in the Middle East. Whenever the US reaches this point, Israel is likely to face its neighbours without the American shield. Worse, a growing number of Americans will begin to see the Israeli fingerprint over their Iraqi defeat.

Taking advantage of the tragedy of 9/11, the neo-cons instantly activated their plans to re-colonize the Middle East, starting with regime change in Iraq, Iran, North Korea and Syria. The US and Israel were hoping to improve upon the success achieved by the British and Zionists during World War I. At this stage, it appears unlikely that these hopes will be realized. For sure, the neo-cons quickly effected regime change in Iraq, but soon after, the resistance of a few thousand Iraqi insurgents also set in motion forces that are threatening to change the global regime.

A sober reckoning of all the costs of the Iraq war -- and these costs are still unfolding -- suggests that the US bid for regime change in the Middle East has boomeranged. Instead, the war has been forcing a regime change on the protagonist.



AFP

M Shahid Alam *teaches economics at a university in Boston. He is the author of Challenging the New Orientalism (IPI: December 2006).*