Engaging Political Islam

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By Phar Kim Beng

I. Introduction

This essay is by Phar Kim Beng, Asian Public Intellectual Fellow with The Nippon Foundation, Japan.

Phar disputes the argument that "political Islam" is fundamentally at odds with the West and thus cannot be engaged. He says that a containment policy of political Islam would by its nature be transnational and thus success would be impossible. He suggests that by engaging Islam, the US can separate the anti-American elements from other groups.

II. Essay by Phar Kim Beng

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It has been said that one of the most striking innovations of Osama bin Laden's brand of international terrorism has been a vision of a holy war, or jihad, that excludes any possibility of compromise.

Bin Laden and his followers do not seek political advantage in a negotiating process, affirmed Daniel Benjamin, who was formerly the director of the office of transnational threats in the Clinton White House. Rather, Benjamin asserted, "They want change that is so radical as to defy any concept of negotiations. They are conducting a war, not seeking entrance into the status quo."

As the United States appears ready to wage an indefinite war of attrition against Osama Bin Laden and his ilk, now currently in Afghanistan, it is also time to quibble on what constitutes the United States' long term strategy to deal with political Islam, otherwise known as Islamic revivalism.

Indeed, what is evidently true is that since the end of Cold War, the perception of Islam as a potential threat to the West has significantly increased. Immediately after the demise of Soviet

Union, the late Manfred Wonner, the Secretary General of NATO, even tried to paint Islam as a "Green threat." He did not succeed of course. But his open identification of Islam as a source of threat gave important glimpses into Western insecurity.

Among some of the reasons frequently offered in the scholarly community as to why "political Islam" is a threat, none is more salient than the assertion that neither "political Islam" nor Islam as a religion itself, is compatible to liberal democracy.

This is the argument peddled by Bernard Lewis at Princeton University, only to be supported by the likes of Samuel Huntington in his "Clash of Civilization" thesis.

Inherent in this argument is that political Islam constitutes both an affront and assault against Western-dominated contemporary world order.

Nevertheless, it is one thing to affirm the incompatibility of political Islam to the world--a reasonable intellectual argument--yet quite another to conclude that Islamic fundamentalists are totally "irreconcilable."

The latter puts Islamic fundamentalists immediately out of the pale of rational discourse, almost permanently consigning them to the margin of international order. As with any attempt to sideline a political actor, such a policy entails the risk of a possible whiplash. After all, political actors who are sidelined would want their grievances heard.

Not surprisingly, Peter Rodman, currently a senior member of the Bush Administration, has attested to the importance of political Islam, especially those elements bankrolled by Iran and other radical regimes.

In an article published in "The Middle Eastern Policy Review" in 1994, Rodman categorically affirmed that "Islamic fundamentalists" should basically be confronted, rather than co-opted. By this he proposed the use of similar strategy employed against the Soviets and the leftist radicals in Latin America during Cold War: Containment.

If one were to take Rodman's argument seriously, it is clear that it has immediate security implications. To begin with, adopting Rodman's strategy of containment means maintaining permanent sanctions against Iran (1979), Libya (1986), Iraq (1990), Sudan (1998) and Afghanistan (1998); perhaps even going to war against all of them in light of the September 11th bombings in New York City and Washington D.C.

Yet, if American foreign policy towards these nations is locked into a situation of indefinite enmity, why wouldn't the level of threat increases exponentially?

Indeed, if sanctions are permanently maintained or new military campaigns launched, Islamic fury at the populist level would grow more strident by the day, as in fact, they have.

More importantly, the United States would be forced to confront a hydra- headed enemy. To date, elements in the pan-Islamic coalition range from the Taliban Islamic fundamentalists now ruling most of Afghanistan, where bin Laden has been headquartered since 1996, to Chechens fighting against Russia to Palestinians fighting for an independent homeland.

Groups identified with bin Laden's al Qaeda now operate in about three dozen countries too; sixty countries according to Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Alleged participants in bin Laden-inspired plots -- from the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and

Tanzania in 1998 to plans to disrupt millennium celebrations in the United States in the first hours of 2000 -- have included citizens from dozens of countries, including Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Jordan, Pakistan, Malaysia and the United States.

More importantly, if America were to heed Rodman's call for total containment, the above regimes would seize on it as an excuse to train or house more Islamic fundamentalists.

Nevertheless, as had been made clear by various authors, political Islam remains a complex phenomenon, with each Islamic group having different agenda and method than the other. Not all are against compromise.

Thus, if the United States were to adopt a belligerent posture against political Islam writ large, anti-American elements in these movements will conveniently coalesce into one united front.

As such, it is only sensible that the United States try to engage with Islamic elements that are not avowedly anti-American. This is to increase mutual understanding before the conflict between political Islam and America spirals into permanent damage.

Engagement is a task that ought to be taken up by the United States with great vigor, barring which the geopolitical stability of the world will be affected; as there are after all forty seven Muslim countries that claim Islam as their official religion.

Thus, while the war against Afghanistan now appears to be unavoidable, the United States and the West's larger war against terrorism remain dependent on engaging and understanding political Islam.

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