International Relations in the Aftermath of 11 September

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By Dingli Shen

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Dingli Shen, Professor and Deputy Director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University. In light of the recent terrorist attacks upon the U.S., Shen highlights the positive shift from unilateral to multilateral U.S. foreign policy by the Bush administration. Shen also argues that a unique opportunity for rapprochement between the U.S. and China exists as they share a common strategic interest in combating Afghanistan-based terrorism.

II. Essay By Dingli Shen

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The September 11 attack on innocent people, American and non-American alike, is outrageous. It shall be met with an international response that aims at eradicating those who plotted and executed this atrocity. The U.N. Security Council has sanctioned retaliation against the international terrorists responsible for the attacks. On September 12, the Security Council issued Resolution 1368, which expressed the Council's "readiness to take all necessary steps to respond to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and to combat all forms of terrorism, in accordance with its responsibilities under the Charter of the United Nations." French Ambassador S.E M.Jean-David Levitte, this month's President of UNSC, has indicated that some Council members interpreted Resolution 1368 as authorization for the U.S. to launch a necessary counterattack.

While, the United Nations has yet to give the U.S. an explicit authorization for the use of force against terrorists, the Council should grant one, provided the U.S. presents conclusive evidence of its findings. Given the international alliance the U.S. has amassed over the past month, few governments would challenge the right of America to launch an offensive to smash terrorists and their associated bases. Nevertheless, the U.S. still has a job to do -- to fully justify its specific

suspects: Osama bin Laden and his associates, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban regime.

Without hard evidence, the U.S. runs a substantial risk of inviting new trouble upon itself. Without credible evidence, not only would the international alliance the U.S. has so diligently assembled crumble, but also new waves of terrorism against America due to mistaken retaliation could ensue. Anti-terrorism is a new kind of war. It is much different from the type of war that states are familiar with. Vis-a-vis terrorists, one does not know where one's enemies are, nor when and where the terrorists are going to attack next. Therefore, an anti- terrorist war is a form of asymmetrical warfare that demands much patience.

Thus far, the U.S. has been wise in waiting several weeks before launching a counteroffensive, while concurrently collecting evidence, mobilizing international cooperation, and deploying forces near Afghanistan. Indeed, the U.S. has shared some of its evidence with allies and other countries including Pakistan. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom has also published some sound evidence that it collected. Nonetheless, the international community is still waiting for America to openly present its own evidence that justifies its attack against bin Laden and the Taliban government as legitimate. Suffice it to say that the U.S. could convince the world at a certain stage that bin Laden was responsible. Consequently, a meticulously planned anti-terror offensive is likely to follow. Such unprecedented warfare may possibly transform international relations at the beginning of the new century.

Since George W. Bush became the U.S. President earlier this year, U.S. foreign policy has witnessed a significant change toward unilateralism, or as Colin Powell has referred to it "a la carte internationalism." The Republican government will work with the U.N. and international community only when it believes that international cooperation serves its interests. Otherwise, the White House will act independently. The U.S. has insisted on developing and deploying a ballistic missile defense system that will violate the ABM Treaty. It has shown no interests in ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and CTBT. U.S. unilateralism led to its disqualification as a member of the U.N Human Rights Commission, for the first time since the Commission's inception. The terrorist attacks against New York, Washington, D.C. and Pennsylvania should push U.S. foreign policy to be more pro-multilateral. Since September 11, President Bush has called leaders of other states for cooperation. In particular, the U.S. is seeking Russia and China's cooperation in terms of political support and intelligence sharing. At the same time, the U.S. has sought U.N. and NATO frames for larger international cooperation. The U.S. has successfully convinced UAE and Saudi Arabia to sever their official relations with Afghanistan (reportedly Pakistan is to end its diplomatic relations with Kabul soon). To secure India's and Pakistan's support of U.S. military action, the Bush Administration has lifted sanctions imposed upon New Delhi and Islamabad imposed due to their nuclear weapons tests in 1998. Washington is reportedly approaching Cuba, North Korea and Sudan in this regard as well. It has also softened its rhetoric against Russia's use of force in Chechnya.

The terrorist attacks may also inadvertently provide a good opportunity to improve a much-derailed China-U.S. relation. Beijing phoned Washington within the first few hours after the attacks to convey its sympathy and condolences. Bush reciprocated by committing to visiting Shanghai for the APEC summit, as well as rescheduling a previously postponed meeting with Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Beijing has dispatched its counter-terrorism officers for a meeting in Washington to address intelligence sharing. Although the Pentagon's latest QDR Report, released at the end of September, still alludes to China as a potential challenger that requires increased U.S. military preparation in terms of hardware pre-positioning in and close to East Asia, China has made no official linkage of its support of the U.S. anti-terrorism endeavor with its stand that the U.S. shall not interfere with Beijing's domestic affairs. Though no one is sure how far the two countries will go in this anti-terrorism direction, their cooperation certainly adds a better understanding of mutual dependence

in combating trans-national crimes of the 21st century.

Actually, China and the U.S. could forge a new partnership in combating terrorism, as both nations are victimized by such troubles. China has internal separatists in Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan. Those in Tibet and Xinjiang have links to the Islamic fundamentalists abroad, and in South and Central Asia. The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001 was made with a clear vision of stemming cross-border terrorism, separatism and extremism. The U.S.-led campaign to eliminate Afghanistan-based international terrorism, when given adequate evidence, is surely a plus to China's national security. There have been some thoughtful concerns regarding the repercussions of the U.S. use of force. How will Islamabad's considerable domestic affinity for the Taliban affect Pakistan's stability? And, how well will the rising influence of the U.S. in Central Asia after the end of the imminent war be handled?

These questions are not simple. Indeed, President General Pervez Musharraf has made a tough choice by aligning with America while running certain risk of domestic unrest. But one should notice that the U.S. and China again share a common interest in seeing a stable Pakistan. Therefore, the moderate government of President Musharraf ought to be supported by both Washington and Beijing. Beijing and Washington could discover more than a few strategic interests by fighting international terrorists together.

Regarding the possibility of American troops stationed as close to China as Afghanistan after "removing" the Taliban government, this might not present a problem as challenging as some may think. First, if the Taliban are removed, it is quite unlikely that the U.S. would station its armed forces for a long time in volatile Afghanistan. Second, while the stationing of American forces would expand Washington's reach into the region, it will first and foremost help to expel lingering terrorist elements, which falls in line with China's security interest. One can hardly imagine that the U.S. would use Afghanistan as a stronghold to invade China, or to promote China's local terrorists/separatists. At most, the U.S. presence would be perceived as a check against China, in connection with the Taiwan question. However, this risk is a small price to pay for what China could truly reap from U.S. military action. To benefit, one has to take risk. To get rid of risk would require China's diplomatic wisdom.

Finally one has to address, even briefly, some root causes of the terrorist attack. The terrorists of September 11 quite likely consider themselves martyrs. Then, where comes their indiscriminate hatred of America and American people? This deserves serious and probably painful reflection. At any rate, it is reasonable to expect U.S. foreign policy, in the wake of the attack, to search for a path of more international cooperation. The future of U.S. foreign policy making cannot avoid bearing in mind international understanding as well as the response to terrorism. Sticking to a unilateralist policy without respecting the legitimate interests of all other countries and peoples only helps breed successors of bin Laden.
