

Into the Void

Recommended Citation

Wade Huntley, "Into the Void", Special Policy Forum 9/11, October 12, 2001,
<https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/into-the-void/>

October 12, 2001

By Wade Huntley

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Wade Huntley, Director of the Program on Global Peace and Security at the Nautilus Institute. Huntley writes that the onset of US military operations in Afghanistan opens a new phase in the global crisis sparked by the September 11 attacks. Huntley describes the range of uncertainties and the scope of risks now at hand, and calls for preparation for the tests that uncertainty and rapid change themselves will pose.

II. Essay By Wade Huntley

"Into the Void"
by Wade Huntley, Nautilus Institute

On October 7, late in the night in Asia (early in the day in the Western Hemisphere), the United States, with the support of Great Britain and other states, began military operations in Afghanistan. In contrast to the attacks in New York and Washington one month ago today, this past weekend's assault was not surprising. Indeed, the inevitability of a US military response has been apparent to almost everyone.

Nor have some of the immediate consequences of this military action been surprising. We knew there would be inevitable civilian victims - and already four United Nations workers have been killed and four others injured when bombing near Kabul struck an NGO landmine removal office. We knew there would be civil unrest in Pakistan - and already people have been killed and injured as clashes between police and anti-US protesters grow throughout that country.

The anxiety and dread most of us feel over the onset of military action is tempered a little by its expectedness. However, this arrival of the expected now deprives us of that very sense of expectedness as to what comes next. The onset of military operations in Afghanistan carries deceptively little shock value, compared to our experiences on September 11. But let us not, for lack of shock, overlook that the world has now entered the second phase of this global crisis, a phase

closer to a true state of war - and a phase in which many grave uncertainties are now immediately at hand.

This new phase poses new challenges. In recent weeks, our greatest challenges were to come to terms with the sheer shock of the September 11 attacks, to try as best we could to understand their meaning, and to adjust our images of the world to accord new realities. Our principal challenge now is to prepare ourselves for the range of grave developments that might soon transpire.

Most immediately, we do not know how events will unfold in Central Asia in the coming days and weeks. The apparent immediate aims of the missile and bombing attacks have been to incapacitate the Afghan military's air defense and signals intelligence, and to undermine the ruling Taliban regime's capacity to resist its own internal opponents. Yet, already there are suggestions that US defense planners are "running out of targets" - saying much about the ineffectiveness of conventional military power under conditions of asymmetric warfare. Will the military assault fracture and topple the Taliban regime, or merely embolden its supporters?

And if the Taliban government collapses, what comes next? The rebel Northern Alliance stands poised to take over - but this force does not represent Afghanistan's plurality Pushtan population, and its own record of human rights violations will hardly allay the concerns other groups in the country. Moreover, a takeover by the Northern Alliance is opposed by Pakistan's President Musharaff, whose support is critical to US war aims. Musharaff, however, on Sunday indicated a willingness to accept a "multi-ethnic" coalition government led by Zahir Shah, the long-time Afghan king exiled since 1973. Other Afghan experts suggest that only Shah, a Pushtan, has the stature and credibility to overcome trenchant tribal rivalries and bring order to the Afghan chaos. Can the fate of the "war on terrorism" truly rest on the fragile heartbeats of an 86-year-old deposed monarch?

We also do not know how military operations in Central Asia might escalate. On Sunday President Musharaff also conveyed his desire - and expectation - that the war in Afghanistan would be very short and would avoid civilian casualties. On both points Musharaff's comments sharply diverged from the expectations US leaders have laid out. Musharaff likely was speaking as much to the tumultuous domestic constituencies he is struggling to hold together as he was to global audiences. Yet to see the fragility of the US-Pakistan "alliance" exposed so overtly at such an early stage of the operations is a foreboding sign. Will Musharaff be able to sustain domestic rule as the Afghan assault stretches on and its scope becomes apparent? How far will the Pakistani military go to suppress anti-US uprisings? How long will Musharaff himself continue to support US aims if a regime antagonistic to Pakistan begins to emerge on its long northern border? For its part, how far will the US bend to assuage Musharaff given that Pakistan only one month ago was one of the key supporters of the Taliban regime?

Over all these uncertainties looms the presence of nuclear weapons in South Asia. Since India and Pakistan tested their nuclear devices in 1998, leaders of both countries have expressed confidence in the durability of nuclear deterrence. Indeed, many South Asian analysts point to the non-use of nuclear weapons in the 1999 Kargil conflict as evidence of the stability they offer to the India-Pakistan relationship. Even if this assessment is correct, the crisis conditions that may quickly emerge if military conflict and disorder spread beyond Afghanistan would create challenges and constraints unprecedented for nuclear-armed adversaries. If hostilities in Afghanistan spark a renewed outbreak of violence in Kashmir, how would leaderships in both Pakistan and India react? Given the added pressures of the global crisis, would these leaderships be able to restrain the action-reaction escalation dynamics that are inevitably incited in Kashmir crises? If, in addition, political disintegration in Pakistan brings into question the command and control of its nuclear weapons, the dangers and uncertainties created could raise a specter of nuclear weapons use unseen since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Finally, we do not know how the United States or other Western powers will react if and when they begin to suffer further casualties. This issue may be faced very quickly in Afghanistan, as the United States now intends to begin assaults with low-flying helicopter gunships that will be vulnerable to remaining Afghan air defense capabilities (including US-built Stinger missiles provided to the Afghan resistance during the Soviet occupation). Even more uncertain are the likely reactions if and when further terrorist assaults take place in the domestic territories of the United States or its allies. The September 11 attacks caught Americans unaware and off guard - but ironically, this very somnolence is now a source of solace. In contrast, polls now show that most Americans expect more attacks, and the US government presumably is making all preparations for homeland protection and defense that are possible in the short-run. Ominously, US FBI and intelligence agencies have been ordered to shift efforts away from investigating the September 11 attacks and toward prevention of future attacks that some sources indicate are now imminent.

How will Americans react if, with all possible preparations in place, its populations, buildings and socio-economic structures prove again painfully vulnerable to terrorist attack? Will the reality of vulnerability, in the face of best prevention efforts, succeed in undermining popular confidence in the US capacity to "win the war on terrorism"? Or will new assaults simply further solidify public rectitude and inflame patriotic fervor for retaliation? Would new assaults empower the more hawkish elements of the Bush administration to greatly widen the scope of the US military responses to include overt attacks on suspected terrorists throughout the world, including in countries (such as the Philippines) that are not themselves supporting terrorism? Might such a global-scale escalation of violence in turn incite terrorist attacks in the United States with chemical or biological weapons?

In the days following the September 11 attacks, much was made of the analogies to the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. Today, however, the more fitting comparison is to the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914. That single act of determined political violence more closely resembles the assault on US civilians with hijacked planes. But the more informative comparison is between the unfolding events triggered by these unexpected attacks. In 1914, the assassination in the Balkans quickly led to a series of decisions spreading through the capitals of Europe that within months had subjected the continent to full-scale war. These decisions and their consequences, in retrospect understandable and perhaps inevitable, at the time cascaded in waves of shock and dismay. Beliefs that European civilization had made war obsolescent surrendered meekly to immersion in an experience of grotesque human carnage that had been previously inconceivable. The disenchantment engendered by this experience over the possibility of genuine progress toward global peace remains with us to this day. Do we now stand at the threshold of a similarly transformational moment in human history? This is, perhaps, the greatest uncertainty.

The point in raising the myriad questions above is not to incite a search for answers that only time can provide, or to urge a desperate race to prepare for every contingency, which is impossible. Also, the point is not to join those heralding a cruel new world in which everything has changed and pure pessimism is justified. Perhaps the crisis will abate on its own, and we will come to remark on how little changed in its aftermath. Or, even more optimistically, the crisis may produce a new era in which long-time adversaries recognize important common interests, international community is strengthened by expanding cooperation and consensus, the United Nations emerges as an empowered instrument of multilateral problem-solving, poverty and oppression - the roots of resentment - are meaningfully reduced, and terrorism as we know it actually is severely constrained.

The possibilities are endless. That is the point. Hence, the task at hand is to avoid misplaced and consuming debates over such possibilities (in either predictive or moral terms) and instead to prepare for the uncertainty itself. We must expect, and somehow brace for, the unexpected. We must find flexibility and durability in reacting to surprises. We must be ready to quickly shed long-

held conceptions in the face of rapidly emerging new realities. The coming weeks and months may sorely test our most heartfelt values, and call on long-dormant qualities of ingenuity, perseverance and brotherhood. We cannot know what we may soon have to become both as individuals and as a global civilization. We cannot be sure which of our current qualities will prove most valuable if and when these tests unfold. We can only hope that we choose wisely as, today, dark uncertainty descends around us and the gale winds of change grow stronger.

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/into-the-void/>

Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org