Terrorism: Defining the Threat and Responses

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By Surinder Rana

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Surinder Rana, Research Fellow at the Center for Study of Asymmetric Conflict at the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, California. Rana defends the recent US military strikes against Afghanistan as a short-term necessity. In the long-term, Rana supports a multilateral, global approach to combating terrorism, but points out that a consensual definition of "terrorism" may prove an impediment. Finally, Rana offers broad guidelines for both regional and global multilateral approaches to confronting terrorism.

II. Essay By Surinder Rana

"Terrorism: Defining the Threat and Responses"
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A viable strategy to fight war against terrorism will involve a combination of military, political, economic and social actions. As highlighted in the media by various security experts, this war is going to be a long drawn affair. In the short-term perspective, the ongoing military action against those who perpetrated this crime against America formed an immediate necessity. The alternative strategy suggested by David Cortright is suitable in the long-term perspective. [1]

The ongoing military action was inevitable because: first, people who are identified for involvement in the 11 September attacks in New York and Washington, need to be held accountable for their acts. They should either be brought to justice or justice brought upon them. Despite repeated diplomatic efforts, the harborers of Osama Bin Laden refused to hand him over for trial. Therefore, military action is justified to deliver the justice in-situ. Second, the public anger against the terrorist attack and resultant destruction in New York and Washington was bound to manifest in a strong and

visible anti-terrorist action by a US-led coalition. Third, terrorists all over the world, and also their harborers should get a message that such acts will never go unpunished. Given an absence of military action by the US, terrorists would not only be further emboldened, but also given a feeling of invincibility, as well as a moral justification for their cause and methodology. Moreover, non-action would have amounted to a waste of millions of dollars spent on mobilization of military forces after the September 11 attacks. It is premature to assess the effectiveness of these military operations. However, as the media reports suggest the strikes are having their intended effects

The suggested long-term strategy, in essence seeks a multilateral approach rather than a unilateral action by the US. For a global coalition against terrorism to succeed, a consensus or near consensus definition of terrorism is required. States and individuals tend to differ on what constitutes terrorism. A terrorist for some is a national hero or a freedom fighter for others. The FBI defines terrorism as, "a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, in violation of the criminal laws of the United States, to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social goals." [2] This definition is mainly to differentiate between a terrorist incident and a routine act of violence. According to some experts, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1993 cannot even be termed a terrorist event because it was not aimed to "intimidate or coerce a government." David Cole, a Professor at Georgetown University's Law Center said, "The Oklahoma City bombing was obviously a tragedy and terrible, but I don't see it as evidence of some conspiracy to engage in terrorism." [3] This begs the question, what then constitutes terrorism?

One suggested definition is that "terrorism is use of terror (a state of moral and psychological shock) as an instrument for bringing social or political change." In this definition, the use of terror as a weapon by states at war is excluded as long as terror is directed against military targets. When terror is used by state or non-state actors to bring about social or a political change, it only affects people. Governments have state apparatus for fighting threats to public safety caused by domestic or foreign elements. However, the use of government apparatus to suppress public opinion for regime sustenance is another form of terrorism called state sponsored terrorism. The fight against terrorism should thus be directed against all forms i.e. individual, group, and state- sponsored terrorism.

In the long run, an international coalition to fight terrorism will have a regional and a global approach. The suggested regional level measures for fighting terrorism may include:

- Instituting regional conflict resolution and conflict management mechanisms. The existing regional conflicts could be analyzed in a regional perspective, without prejudice to the interests and objectives of one state or the other. The regional conflicts when seen from a global or dominant power perspective tend to be interpreted by interested groups as intra-religious or intra-ethnic clashes. These interpretations are often used by such groups as motivation source for indulging in extreme forms of aggression, which at times manifest into suicide attacks. A regional conflict management approach under the aegis of the United Nations (UN) is therefore more likely to succeed.

- Creating new, or strengthening the existing regional institutions for gathering data, monitoring and surveillance of groups and states indulging in terrorist related activities.

- Discouraging warring regional states with political and military asymmetries, from using terror as a weapon for gaining national objectives. A dominating power could use terror or economic/military coercion as a positive asymmetry. A weaker power will always use terror as a negative asymmetry, which often results in encouragement to non- state actors based upon religious or ethnic issues. Use of terror as an instrument of state and encouragement of terrorist activities by any state should be stopped.

A global approach should encompass:

- Encouraging devolution of more political powers to people, which could reduce propensity for people indulging in violence against their own governments. This in essence means encouraging states to adopt democratic system of governance. However, in this process care should be taken to let people decide about the type of system they ought to adopt rather than imposing a particular model of democracy, with complete disregard to the relevant cultural and social ethos.

- Imposing strict global measures to stop the illegal spread of small arms and the weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

- War against narcotics. Drugs are a major source of financing for terrorist activities. A global war against illegal production, sale, and use of drugs is a global necessity. This war would involve political, social and military actions by states, which will have to be supported by international bodies and rich nations.

- Improving international financial system to discourage fund generation, banking and transfer of money for terrorist related activities. Systems like "hawala" [4] transactions and money raising on dubious grounds need to be strictly monitored at the global level.

- Discouraging support to dissident and insurgent activities for toppling governments. This trend has prevailed in certain third world countries, which need to be curbed.

- Global initiative to help those states, which are adversely affected by terrorism. Also, those states, which are in the forefront for global fight against terrorism, need to be suitably encouraged and rewarded.

Terrorism is an existing phenomenon, which has over the years affected almost all parts of the world. The September 11, terrorist attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon has amplified the magnitude and proportion of this threat to the entire free world. The United State as leader of the free world finds itself today at the forefront of this ongoing fight against global terrorism. The immediate objective of this war is the neutralization of those elements, which has been identified as perpetrators of this attack on America. The current military action by US-led coalition against Al-Qaeda organization and Taliban has widespread international support. In the long run a global effort will be required under the aegis of the UN to weed out this menace. Regional coalitions and international consensus is going to be the key elements of success in this war against terrorism.

NOTES

[1] Essay by David Cortright in the Nautilus Special Forum Website

[2] Mary S. Cooper, "Definition of Terrorism Often Vary" CQ Researcher Vol.5, No. 27, July 21, 1995, p.646

[3] U.S. Department of State, Patterns of Global Terrorism 1994, April 1995, p. vi.

[4] Hawala is a form of international money transaction in which there is no transfer of money from one country to another, however, the transacting parties benefit at both ends. For more details visit website.

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